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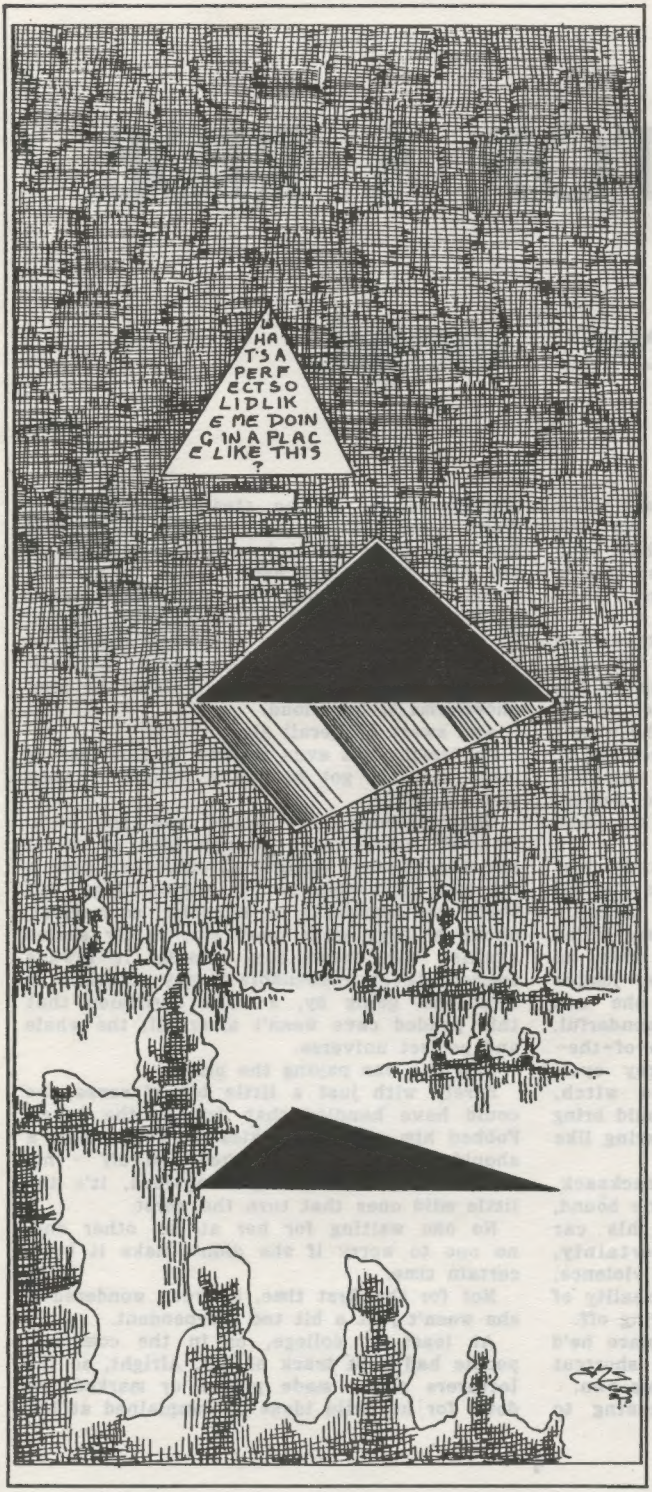

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TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Steve Sneyd

Maureen hunched herself up as best she could against the driving rain, and, for the thousandth time in the three hours she'd been stuck in this arse-end of the universe lane to nowhere, wondered if she couldn't have handled the situation better.

It was the way the driver of the Rover had suddenly changed that'd thrown her. The first twenty miles after he picked her up at the motorway exit, it'd been all admiration of her freedom from the rat-race, and how he wasn't just the dull pinstriped insurance executive he appeared, really he was a deeply sensitive ecology-minded caring left-of-centre person. And for proof, she'd only to look in his glove compartment.

And then when she did, she'd only just realised that it contained a mini-aquarium full of what seemed dozens, but were probably only two or three, of hugely filmy-tailed exotic oriental fish of some kind, when he was grabbing her, trying to pull her jumper out of her belt, blethering that she was driving him crazy, thought she was wonderful, those bottle-top nipples, that long top-of-the-milk coloured hair, those slate grey eyes, marvelous, incredible, she was a witch, making him turn into a layby, she could bring back his youth, please, please, slavering like an overloaded donkey ...

And she'd hit him with her rucksack, jumped out, leapt a field gate in one bound, and ostentatiously written down his car number while he glowered uncertainly, obviously torn between pleading and violence, before presumably panicking at the reality of what she could say and do, and roaring off.

Leaving her stuck in a nothing place he'd solemnly assured her was an ideal shortcut towards her Welsh destination, and his own.

Behind her, ploughed fields turning to sloping swamp in the steady downpour. In front, a half-arc of road visible if she twisted her head round in the hood of her cagoule, at the risk of a cricked neck. Across its surface, pitted with the work of overflowing clogged up ditches, a tangled, unloved looking hedge, lit like blue eyes by a couple of abandoned fertilizer bags. Beyond that another feature-less sloping field rising gently into the grey ghostforms of low cloud.

And sweet buggerall else.

No traffic, not even a damn tractor that at least might've got her to a village or some sort of shelter.

Only a couple of hours now till dark. Maureen hadn't even enough idea of where she was to start walking. If only she'd paid a bit more attention to her surroundings. But there was something so hypnotic, so magical, about a large warm posh car, safely sealed against the harsh day outside, it always seemed almost treasonable to pay attention to what was going by, a weak admission that this padded cave wasn't after all, the whole and perfect universe.

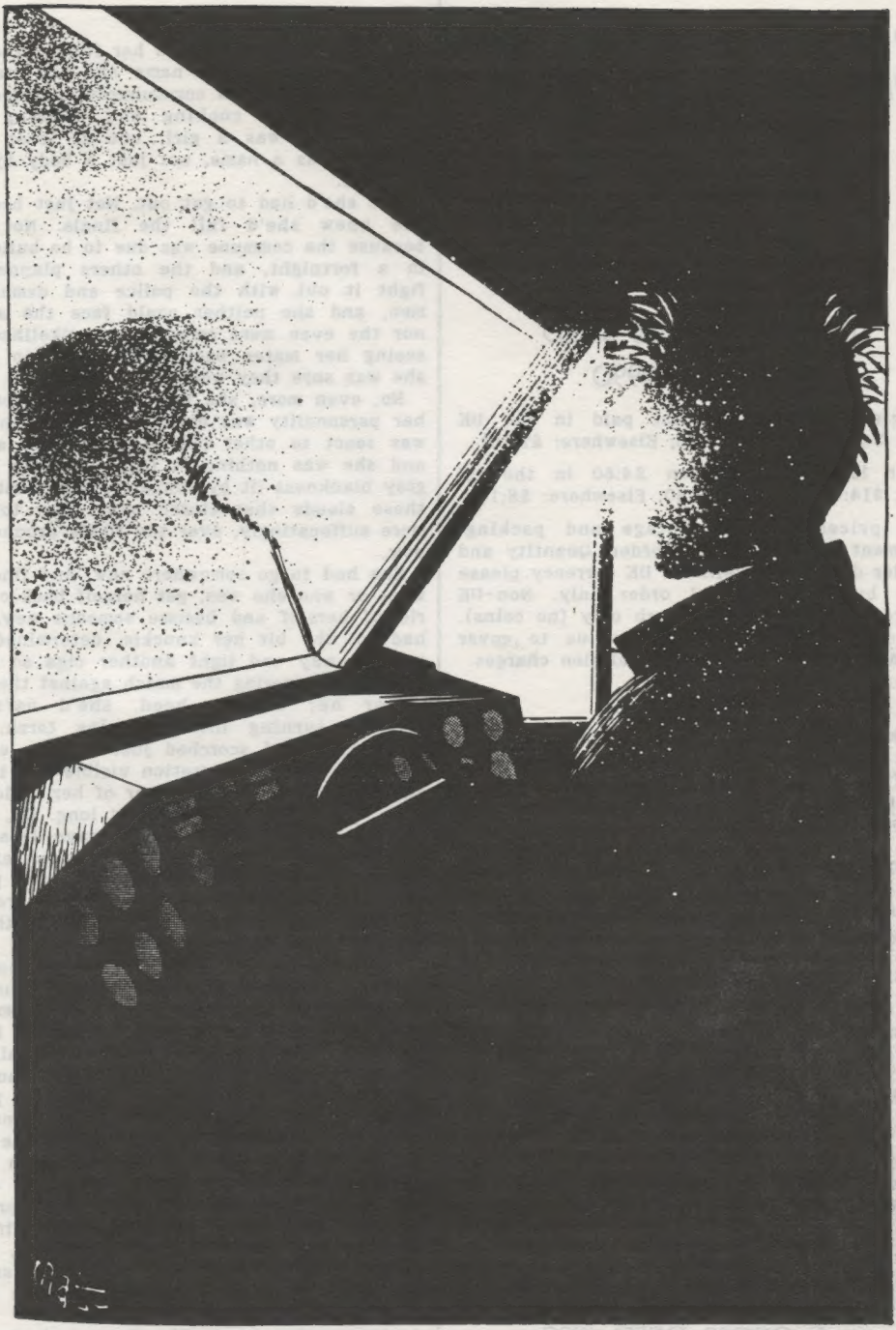
Now she was paying the price.

Surely with just a little bit of sense she could have handled that drip in the Rover. Fobbed him off with a kiss, or better still a shoulder to cry on. Laughed him off - no, that could've been very dangerous, it's the little mild ones that turn the worst.

No one waiting for her at the other end, no one to worry if she didn't make it by a certain time.

Not for the first time, Maureen wondered if she wasn't just a bit too independent.

At least at college, or in the commune, people had kept track of her. Alright, so the lecturers either made passes or marked her down for her wild ideas or complained at her



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idle attitude to work, and her fellow students took the mick of her name and her dreaminess, and her fellow communards expected her to do all the cooking and washing just because she was a girl, but at least they knew her as a name, not just a body by the roadside.

But she'd had to get out. Not just because she knew she'd fail the finals. Not just because the commune was due to be bulldozed in a fortnight, and the others planned to fight it out with the police and demolition men, and she neither could face the aggro, nor the even more embarrassing likelihood of seeing her mates back down, as deep down she was sure they would.

No, even more, she had to get out because her personality was disappearing. All she did was react to other people. Leave her alone, and she was nothing, a fog, a trailing mist, grey blankness lit by shapeless movement like those clouds that closed over more totally, more suffocatingly, over the fields around her now.

She had to go somewhere new, and find out what or who she was, get herself back or get rid of herself and become someone new. She had to. She bit her knuckle, determined not to give way and light another ciga so soon. Anyway, sheltering the match against the rain under her cagoule hood, she'd narrowly escaped turning into a living torch, the orange material scorched just to the left of her eyes, the discolouration visible now like a shadowy figure at the corner of her vision.

No, she'd wait. But for how long. Oh, hell, what a fool she felt. The big brave departure this morning, off to find the universe, expect me when you see me, I'll send you a postcard, good luck, all that, and now here she was stuck like a tree in quicksand less than a hundred miles from the college.

The pubs'd be open by now, nearly, anyhow, her watch'd stopped but it must be round about that time. The guys from the commune would be in there, pints in hand, going for the nth time over the details of how they were going to repel the attack on their dwelling. Toothpaste bombs in paper bags, Tommy'd suggested, the gingernutted idiot. She grinned to herself. He was the only one who had a sense of humour, even if it was daft. He'd a lovely bum, too. She'd always said nothing on your own doorstep, but she might've made an exception in his case, if he'd ever noticed her. Mind, Mick said he was queer ... gay, you had to say ... but then that was probably because Mick fancied him deep down.

A monstrous bang. Thunder ... oh God, it

couldn't be. Shut your windows if indoors, don't stand under a tree if outdoors. She hadn't noticed the lightning, the next one might be right on top of her. Ball-lightning came down chimneys, her dad'd seen some once roll right round the kitchen in a house he was redecorating. Poor bugger ... retired, and five minutes later dead. It was funny having such old parents ... her brother and sister were as old as most people's parents, her mum and dad were ancient. Were. Were was right. Bastard goddam truck. They hadn't a chance. Still, at least she wouldn't have to worry about their being upsetting because she failed her exams. Or ran away without taking 'em. Scared to fail, scared to have a go. That's what her dad'd've thought. Her mum would say everything she did was wonderful.

That spoiled it, too, because her mum praised everything she did, whether it was good or bad. So nothing was ever really an achievement. And her dad expected her to be an adult as soon as she could walk and talk.

You couldn't win. Still, they'd had her so late, must've been an accident, not that she dare ask, but seventeen years between the next and her, must've been a mistake ... bastard with a pin in a durex factory.

Oh God ... another flash ... she'd seen this one alright, like a fairground. Count, count till the rumble, that told you how far away it was. 720 miles an hour, sound, 60 seconds a minute, 60 minutes an hour ... 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12 ... boom, rumble rumble ... that was ... let's see ... a fifth of ... 12 miles ... just under two miles ... that wasn't so bad. rain easing a bit ... oh no it wasn't ... "What, who me?"

She'd never seen the lorry loom out of the gathering dusk, its noise hidden in the downpour. A huge shape, hanging above her ... a face: "Give you a lift?"

"Sorry ... I was miles away ... the rain, I couldn't hear ... Yes, yes, please."

"How far are you going?"

Trick question, answer carefully, don't say "as far as you like," she'd heard that joke, he might take it serious ...

"Cardiff, my uncle's."

"I'll take you to Newport, hop in."

Scramble up what seemed a cliff-face, huge arm reaching past her to shut the door, clang. Settle back into the blessed absence of rain, rain trapped now outside, banging the windscreen. Massive motor hump a barrier between her and him, safe as houses, must be, rumbling away.

"Soon be lighting up time."

"Yes."

Too tired to talk, but must make the effort, be polite, not seem snobby, too posh ... a truck, suddenly it came back to her in a wave, a truck, only three months ago a truck killed her mum and dad, maybe even this one, she'd have to get out, have to, she'd sworn she wouldn't take a lift in a truck. But he was talking, surely they wouldn't mind if she was polite and listened and got out at the next town ... if she could see it through the rain, the windscreen wiper on her side of the window, broken, flopping like a dead insect, the world outside visible to the driver but not to her except in a distorted sideways fragment due to the screen curvature.

"Load of rubbish, this about motorways."

"Yes?"

"Saving time - not in bad weather they don't. If you can read a map, pick backroads, ratruns they call 'em, you can beat a motorway any old day. I've proved it over and over."

"Yes ... uh, yes, I bet you're right ... I don't drive myself."

"Bit dodgy, a girl hitching on her own ... not that I'm not glad of your company, but such awful things happen, these days."

A shape, huge, and still she hadn't looked at his face. She wanted to, but couldn't bear to move. She wanted to tell him about the Rover driver, but somehow it would've been like breaking a confidence. She wanted to sleep, but that would've been rude. Transfixed by contradictory possibilities, by inertia, she seemed to hang in an endless limbo. She made a great effort, spoke:

"How long to Newport?"

"Keen to get away from me, eh?"

"No, not at all, I only meant ..."

"Hour or so ... depends ..."

She didn't dare ask what it depended on. She wished she was anywhere else. Back in college, sitting down to her exams. They didn't start till Monday. She could, what was it that Yank student called it, touch base at her uncle's, get a train back, still be back in time, tell the commune mob she'd been joking about running away, dramatising herself. Tommy'd understand, even if the others didn't. Perhaps he was missing her right now, maybe her going away like that'd make him realise he really needed her. She'd take her exams, she'd stand up to the bailiffs with 'em, win or lose she'd've tried. If only ... if she got back there safe, she'd do everything she should, promise, promise ... she wriggled with impatience to be somewhere else.

The driver misunderstood. "Want to ... uh ... take a leak? You'll get a bit wet ... have to shelter behind the wagon."

"No, no."

"Modest?"

"It isn't that ... I don't want to."

"Student?"

"Yes ... uh, yes ... geology ..."

"Find us some more oil and get those sheiks off our backs, eh?"

"I don't know ... I don't know sometimes if it's all worthwhile." The dim shape nodded. There was a silence. Then he lit a cig.

"You could've had one of mine," Maureen said. "Least I could do to thank you."

"Doesn't matter ... usually roll my own but these were on offer, too cheap to refuse ..." and then as if something in his mind made a quantum leap of association: "You're not lonely, are you?"

"Lonely?"

"Over there ... in that seat on your own ... we could stop."

She reached for the doorhandle, but all the same she was sure she wouldn't get out in time, sticky and stiff with the pounding of the seat against her, dazed and half-deaf with the engine throbbing, hypnotised by the onrush of darkness in the world around and the endless unwinding of the road beneath the twin hands of the headlamps.

The driver kept his hands on the wheel as he spoke again, words that seemed to whirl and tangle and disappear like the odd roadsign, round here the old fingerpost-type destination signs, so you could never take in the whole of a name or make sense of the mileages quoted.

"If you looked at me properly you'd see I'm the ugliest driver you ever saw, boils and scars and mattering eyes and a whole lot more, but you wouldn't have to look, or I could do it from behind so you didn't need to see me at all, and I'd keep the pus from the sores well away from your lovely hair, and you won't realise what you'd be doing, you'd be turning me human again, no, again's the wrong word, I was bewitched, that's true, turned into something horrible stuck like a Flying Dutchman up behind this wheel, but I don't really know what I was before, only I know I wasn't this, what you'd see if I were cruel and made you look, I have a torch here by the tacho, I could shine it on my face and you'd scream and faint and I could do what I wanted but I won't, I'll ask you nice, I want it to be voluntary, and if you do I'll give you three wishes and they'll all come true, I promise."

Nothing made sense, it was all lies, but how could she fight it, how could she stand the thought that it might be true and a vast monstrous visage might leap at her out of the dark lit by a sudden flare of torchlight and she would scream and be forced to go on screaming forever into the blackness of a loonie bin or over a bridge or sleeping pills or whatever just to get peace from it.

"Yes," she muttered miserably, and turned herself round, her face against the damp cold window, staring into the darkness, her back to him and all the horrors he might or might not represent, and tried to fix Tommy's face in front of her eyes, smiling, and pretend it was him while the engine stopped, and hands pulled down her jeans over her behind, and various things were done to her, and then stopped, and a voice, a gentle, cheerful voice, said:

"It's alright, you can turn round now." And the cab interior light went on, suddenly, so that she clenched her eyes and flung her arm against her face to keep out the glare. And opened them, at last, slowly, to the insistent soft pull of fingers at her eyelids.

And was looking up at Tommy, and he was holding out a letter and saying: "It's from the college," and she tore it open, and it said she'd passed her exams, and then Tommy got back into bed with her, into the warm place he'd left, and gave her a cup of tea and a cigarette, and said: "I've had a letter, too, from the Council, they're not demolishing this place for another three years now, the government cuts or something, they say we can stay if we pay rent."

And she smiled and went back to sleep.

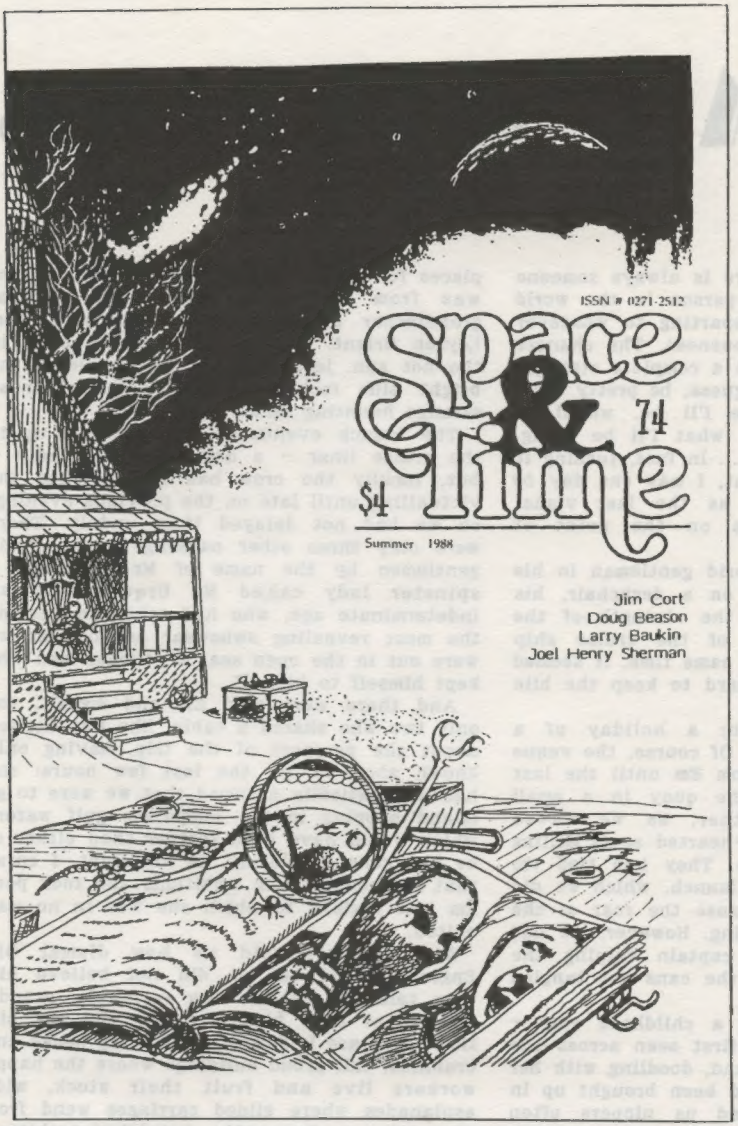
It was very lucky for her, thought the pseudo-Tommy, that her third wish hadn't been to have her parents come back to her. They wouldn't have been very nice to look at just now. He should know - he'd been six months dead himself before she cured him on that lonesome road.

Tenderly, he kissed her sleeping shoulder, and prepared to enjoy the day.

Pity about the real Tommy ending up in his place, but still, it was like musical chairs or pass the parcel, he in turn would have his chance to do a swop if the right helpful sort of woman came along.

THE END

Steve Sneyd is no stranger to readers of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE*, having first appeared in issue #3 in 1985. He has been published in more than 450 different magazines around the world, and has won several awards for both his prose and his poetry. He lives in Huddersfield, and enjoys footpath-walking, castles and rail travel.



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EM

D.F. LEWIS

"When anybody dies, there is always someone else who was the last person in the world that they saw before departing to whatever fate awaits their consciousness. The chances that this someone else is a complete stranger to the deceasee must, I guess, be pretty high. I always wonder where I'll be, who'll or what'll be within sight, what I'll be doing, what'll I be listening to ... In fact, turning it on its head for a moment, I may one day *be* that complete stranger as the last visual intake by one who is on the point of dying ..."

The speaker was a florid gentleman in his fifties who lolled back on a deckchair, his voice flattened out by the strength of the warm wind. The deck of the cruise ship sloped both ways at the same time, it seemed to me, as I swallowed hard to keep the bile down.

I was on honeymoon: a holiday of a lifetime, I had imagined. Of course, the venue had been kept secret from Em until the last moment. We had left the quay in a small launch, laughing together, as we waved goodbye to all the good-hearted souls milling amid the party balloons. They had tied tin cans to the end of the launch, which we did not at first notice, because the roar of the sea prevented any rattling. However, we had a very angry launch captain cursing the "crazee Ingleesh" when the cans got tangled up with the propeller.

I loved Em. She was a childhood sweetheart, one whom I had first seen across the English infants' playground, doodling with her toes in the dust. We had been brought up in a very hot climate and us nippers often walked about nude – like the natives – and, from that day forth, we walked hand in hand. She became an essential part of me and I of her. So, our dream trip was to be as special as I could make it. The cruise ship was to make a tour of the most exotic spots imaginable, leaving the southern hemisphere for Liverpool and Belfast as the first ports of call. We had heard legends of the northern home country but now, on honeymoon, we would have the opportunity to see these places for ourselves. My paternal grandmother was from Northern Ireland, my maternal grandfather an East India Docks man from Leyton Orient: I remember them squatting in the hot sun, letting their toes dangle in the bright blue rockpool, telling tales of those strange haunting lands.

The launch eventually delivered us up to the cruise liner – a day late, admittedly – but, luckily the crew had not finished the victualling until late on the previous evening, so we had not delayed them unduly. There were only three other passengers: the florid gentlemen by the name of Mr Drewhart; a spinster lady called Ms Urquhart of an indeterminate age, who had taken to wearing the most revealing swimwear as soon as we were out in the open sea; a younger man who kept himself to himself.

And there were also Em and myself, the only two who shared a cabin. She was excited about the prospect of the trip, having only known about it for the last few hours: she had automatically assumed that we were to go island hopping in the temperate gulf waters which would have been further than either of us had gone previously. In hindsight, I curse that I exceeded such ambitions and took poor Em into regions to which she was in no way suited.

Mr Drewhart told us how dismal Old England would be: we did not believe him (and told him so) for "my respectful grandparents of both blood-streams told me, sir, that the place is full of interesting nooks and crannies, tall proud buildings where the happy workers live and fruit their stock, wide esplanades where gilded carriages wend from Coronation to Coronation, burnished architectural feats of Religion spiring into the varied skies ..."

He would interrupt me with his philosophical ramblings concerning death, as if that were answer to every argument. So, from that time on, we took him with a pinch of sea-salt, putting him down as a natural melancholic.

The captain and his crew, as well as the other male passenger, kept their distance.

They were blurred outlines at the fringes of our otherwise fevered excitements. Em and I had previously played sex games together, so had the highest expectations of the fore-, mid- and post-play that wedlock would entail. And, at first, we did live upon a wild shimmering plane of existence, a near continuous state of orgasm. If our cabin had had flies upon its walls, they would have spun violently round on their rumps in over-excitement at the sights they had seen. However, it all tailed off gradually, the nearer the cruiser carved its path into the grey sealands further north ... We imagined the dark faces of the crew spying on us; we saw them in every corner of the ship in whispering huddles. (Little did we know, but they were talking in undertones so that we would not worry about the unseasonal storms that had been forecast for the area.)

If it had not been for Ms Urquhart, I think Em and I would have jumped overboard, hand in hand. Despite the encroaching edge of the new winds, she still maintained the flimsy holiday garb, visibly shuddering as her hair flew about her face "like the black panicky flames of hell," as Mr Drewhart put it. She would wave away that gentleman's "silly remarks" and lean closer towards us, as all three of us sat in deckchairs, saying:

"Just because I myself haven't hitched the knot doesn't mean that I don't know what you're going through. I know that things don't always go smoothly between married couples. But, rest assured, dear people, love will certainly prevail."

My eyes filled with tears. Em stared out to sea, unmoved. Our hands were still entwined.

Ms Urquhart lay back on her deckchair. Another one flew across the planks in the snatching wind, like a striped awning stick-insect. Mr Drewhart sauntered towards us, smiling broadly:

"Don't listen to that old bat."

He nodded towards the now dozing spinster, and walked on rubbing his striped belly waistcoat.

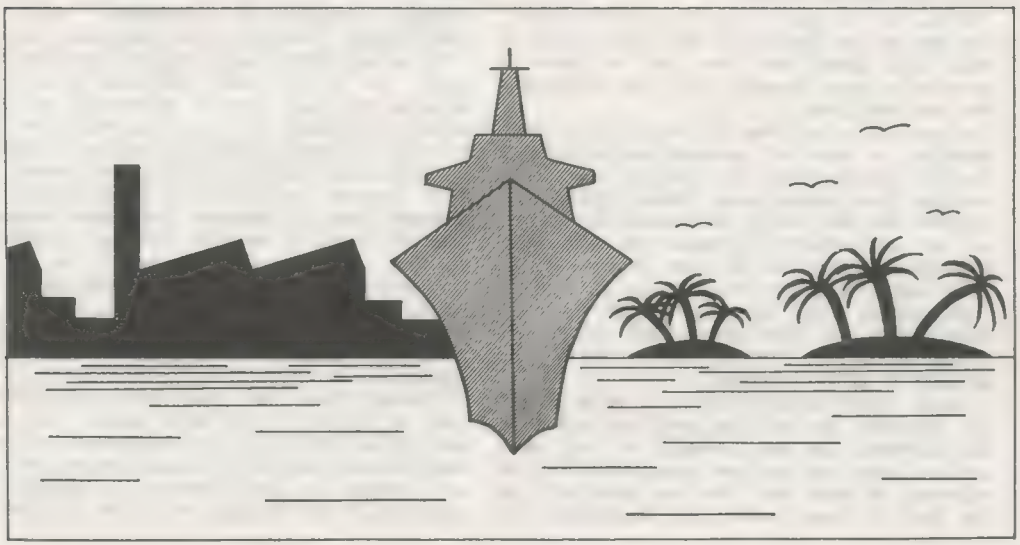
Exactly when it was that Em had died, I was then and am still unsure. Her little hand had been colder anyway for some time, but now it stuck like ice. Her eyes flickered for the last time, I suspected, as the passenger with no name passed along the deck-rail between her and the sea, en route for the dining hall.

Along the horizon, I had been watching the distant misty shapes of dockside cranes rearing into the turbulent sky like stilted dragonflies. Unaccountably, I recalled those jokester wedding guests back home and wondered if they would send us a postcard.

Like life, the end was rather sudden.

THE END

This is Des Lewis's second story for *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE*, having made his debut in the last issue with the provocative "Weird-monger" suite. A native of Coulsdon in south London, he is married with two children, a boy and a girl.



ENTHOUSIASMOS

Matthew Dickens

Bluey Fitchell, at work in his cubicle at the Bureau of SOCial SECurity, was undergoing a spiritual crisis. He was holding a self-colloquy with himself, as was the custom in these times:

Bluey I: I'm getting sick of this crappy job. I'm cutting out.

Bluey II: What for? What else is there for you to do?

Bluey I: Plenty, if I actually took the trouble to set myself a task, something I could really apply myself to - something *useful*.

Bluey II: What task? There are no tasks. You know, you're the starriest-eyed asshole I ever met. You know damned well what your station in life is, and you'll stick to it.

Bluey I: Your trouble is you're a defeatist, a spineless, shoulder-shrugging, do-nothing.

Self-Colloquy. SC. Talk to yourself because nobody else will. Have a healthy relationship with yourself. It might work for some, but Bluey always ended up screaming at himself. What the hell, I'm married to my own lousy head, he thought sourly.

Still, the old bag in his head had a point. The age of the individual who could leave a mark was gone. Now you had to have a personality small enough to fit into the high-rise box you lived in ...

Bluey was jerked from his reverie by a loud bleeping. It spiralled upwards excruciatingly, finally disappearing to dizzying ultrasonic heights. Then began again. Bluey winced, and fumbled for the switch that would kill it. He sat up expectantly, intrigued by what the powers-that-were had in store for him.

The small message-screen lit up.

MESSAGE TO BLUEY FITCHELL: REPORT TO COORDINATOR JOS VULME IMMEDIATELY, ZONE RBS16, BLOCK T30, LEVEL 17, ROOM J804 ... MESSAGE TO BLUEY FITCHELL ...

Bluey noted the location, then switched off the machine. He left the building, and took the slideway. He was starting to feel misgivings. Why had he been summoned? Had he offended in some way? Was he going to lose his job? Or even worse, his apartment? By the time he reached room J804, he was moist with a cold perspiration.

The door opened. "Come in, Mr Fitchell," welcomed Coordinator Vulme from within his desk-console. "Make yourself comfortable ... Now, Mr Fitchell, you have been summoned here for an important social purpose. The authority has been pleased with your work, and we feel you should be given a chance to further show your citizen's commitment to social stability. Now, as you're doubtless aware, the city has a severe housing shortage. We've constructed over 150 R-blocks over the past year, but the problem remains as grave as ever.

"However, our scientists have come up with an ingenious solution to the problem: a means of transferring the consciousness from one mind to another. They've discovered a special wavelength - Wavelength F, as it has been designated - which can effect this transfer. The mind simply tunes its own wavelength to that of the target individual, and broadcasts its consciousness along Wavelength F, into his mind."

Bluey struggled to comprehend. "Oh?" he said weakly. "And how does this affect me?"

"In a very direct way," replied the Coordinator. "As I say, this city has a serious housing shortage. Project Mindshare, as this scheme is called, is a new approach to the problem. Instead of building costly R-blocks, an ultimately futile exercise, we intend to find homes for the city's homeless by allowing them to transfer their consciousness into the mind of someone with an apartment of their own. You are honoured to be one of the persons selected for the initial phase of Project Mindshare, Mr Fitchell."

Slowly, Bluey started to understand. "You mean ... I've got to let someone else share my mind?"

"Correct. But don't have any fears about loss of privacy; tests have shown that the brain is so extensive that the chances of your consciousness and that of your tenant meeting are slender in the extreme, so there's no question of his reading your mind. Naturally,

you can always chat to each other, and we hope that friendly relationships between tenant and host will develop."

"Host?" snapped Bluey. "You mean host like host to a parasite?"

Vulme laughed. "Good lord, no, not at all. 'Host' here is intended in the sense of host at a party, say. Your tenant will be a guest, not a parasite."

"But ... if the mind of this guy is roaming around in mine, what does his body do in the meantime?"

"Tenants will clearly not be needing their bodies while residing in a host's mind. So they're frozen in storage until a job can be found for them. Until then, the best place they can be is somewhere out of the way. What better place than the spacious expanses of the human mind?"

"But ... but ..." Bluey sputtered the word like a faulty computer printer.

A black plas box appeared from a recess in the desk-console. Vulme gestured for Bluey to take it. "That's a dossier on your new tenant. Play the tape tonight; you're due to receive him tomorrow morning. Well, if you've no further questions, I'll bid you good day. Please report to the hospital at 1000 hrs. Good morning, Mr Fitchell."

Coordinator Vulme shimmered just for an instant, then blanked out. Bluey realised he had been talking to a holo-simulacrum. Bloody cheek ...

As he took the slideway back, Bluey reflected unhappily that tonight would effectively be the last time he would truly be alone. He had the horrible misgiving that his 'tenant' would never leave his head. All that stuff about keeping them in cold storage was so much pule; that would be a crazy waste of space. They would probably incinerate them. Tough on the tenant, but much tougher, in Bluey's view, on the host.

The lift disgorged Bluey, and he let himself into his room. He slumped into the chair by the vid-aud, listlessly put the tape of his tenant-to-be in the player, then switched on. Flickerings on the little screen, then words came up:

TO THE HOST:

THIS IS A PERSONAL PROFILE OF YOUR NEW MINDSHARE TENANT. THIS PERSON HAS BEEN VERIFIED BY THE CITY RESIDENTIAL BUREAU, AND FOUND SUITABLE FOR MINDSHARE. A TRIAL PERIOD OF THREE (3) WEEKS IS STATUTORY BEFORE ANY REQUEST FOR CHANGE/REMOVAL OF TENANT MAY BE MADE. ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED WITHIN THIS PROFILE IS PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL.

The words faded. For a moment there was nothing, then a head appeared before a bright neutral background. It belonged to a guy of about twenty, with hair cut and dyed to a fashion, urban-pale skin, and dark eyes with a hint of natural brightness.

The mouth smiled, and then began to speak.

"Hi. My name's Zem. Zem Louis, or Louie. I'm 19. I'm perfectly fit, both physically and mentally. I'm a very friendly and adaptable person. I enjoy sports and other healthful activities. I'm heterosexual, with a seven percent deviation score. I have an IQ of 88, so I'm always ready for lively and intelligent conversation. My interests include music, strobe-cruising, synthing, psychopneumatics, calisthenics ..."

Bluey stopped listening. He was fazed. What kind of semi-sentient husk-head was this? What the hell was strobe-cruising? And psychopneumatics?

"I'm really grateful for your kindness in allowing me to take up tenancy within your brain," the recording assured Bluey. "I hope that we will be friends, and that we'll find time off from our SC to talk to each other sometimes. I look forward to meeting you upon my admission to your brain. Thanks."

The image faded to darkness, the screen became a void, with a few flickering electronic motes dancing upon it.

Bluey sat inert. Goodbye privacy, sanity. he was going to have a freak dossing down in his skull. This was all that was needed to make life completely unbearable.

He pressed the wall-stud, and his bed slumped down from its niche. He lay down, fully clothed, and dreamt, for it was the last time he would be able to dream without someone looking on, and sniggering.

The next day, Bluey sat in the hospital, waiting for the legalised squatter to be stuck in his head. A doctor appeared.

"Mr Fitchell? So sorry to have kept you waiting. I'm Dr Klass." The white-coated man was all geniality. "This won't take too long. if you'd just care to step this way, you'll be able to meet your new tenant face to face."

He led the way into an adjoining room. At one end stood an incomprehensible array of machinery, while at the other, seated on a chair, was the person Bluey had seen on the tape the night before, Zem Louis or Louie. He had on some kind of eyeset, and was sitting quite still. Klass went over to him and pressed a button on the top of the set.

Slowly, Zem's hands rose and removed the eyeset. He mumbled: "Hey, what ..."

"Meet your new host, Mr Louis," said Klass. "Mr Bluey Fitchell."

Zem's bright but oddly glazed eyes found Bluey. "So you're the guy?" he said, and left

the query hanging.

Bluey could find nothing to say. Klass grinned waxily at him. "I'll just see if Dr Hewell's ready," he said.

"Shee," muttered Zem, "I'll sure's hell miss this," and gazed broodingly at the eyeset.

"What is it?" asked Bluey cautiously.

Zem looked fleetingly at him. "It's a set," he said unhelpfully. "You cruise with it. You tune in, see all the pretty lights making patterns, and you follow 'em." he paused. "Hey, could you put it on sometimes? When I'm in your head? Then I could still cruise. You can have the set. Just put it on maybe once a day. You'll get so's you can't take it off."

"Sure," said Bluey, who had no intention of ever putting the thing on.

Another white-coat joined them. "Good day to you both, Mr Fitchell, Mr Louis," he said, nodding perfunctorily at each. "I'm Dr Hewell, and I'll be conducting the mind-transfer op. Now, Mr Fitchell, if you'd follow me please –" Hewell led Bluey to where the large machine stood, intimidatingly. He pressed a catch, and a section swung open to reveal a small compartment.

"Please sit down Mr Fitchell," he said, indicating the seat. Bluey obeyed, and Hewell closed the door. "Can you hear me Mr Fitchell?" he asked. Bluey nodded. "In a moment we will open Wavelength F and transfer Mr Louis into your head. Any questions?"

Bluey said dourly: "Can you hurry up? I need to take a leak."

Bluey heard a crackle behind his ear, then Hewell spoke again. "OK Mr Fitchell? We're just locating Wavelength F. Stand by ... Transmission – *now*."

Bluey closed his eyes reflexively, as if someone had kicked sand into them. But there was no sensation. He had imagined a wrenching, a tearing feeling, as his mind was opened, a feeling of rape and violation. Instead – nothing.

There was a click and Hewell had opened the door. "How do you feel Mr Fitchell?"

Bluey didn't want to speak. He was afraid that if he did it would be in the languid tones of Zem Louis. "I'm fine," he croaked.

"Excellent," beamed Hewell.

"A perfect transmission," said Klass smugly.

Bluey felt relieved. But what if the transmission has damaged Zem's mind? Imagine having a raving lunatic loose in your head! Cautiously, he introspected. Was Louis there? He felt a surge of hope; perhaps the transmission had killed him, or maybe –

Jeez ... This is some weird trip ... Oh shit. He was there.

So this is where I'm gonna live? Weird ... But better than a box fifty floors up in the sky.

"Do you have any indication that Mr Louis is there?" inquired Hewell.

Bluey nodded gloomily. "He's here."

"Excellent. then our role is over. It's down to the two of you now. I'm sure Mr Louis will be much happier in the green, wide-open spaces of your mind, Mr Fitchell. Well – goodbye."

Hewell and Klass shook hands with Bluey, and showed him out. Green wide-open spaces of your mind. Was that an insult?

Back home, Bluey fixed himself a meal, but he was too much on edge to eat. But Zem was keeping quiet. Bluey pictured him wandering at random, marvelling at the sights.

He wasn't so peaceful the next day, though. Bluey was at work, compiling his statistics and Self-Colloquising.

Bluey I: It's been pretty quiet so far. I hope it stays that way.

Bluey II: Why aren't you a bit more sociable? The poor guy's probably lonely. Why don't you talk to him?

Bluey I: Frankly, I've no wish to strike up a friendship with him. Far as I'm concerned, he's a freaky bum who just happens to be squatting in my head.

Bluey II: You don't know he's a freaky bum. You just make assumptions. You're prejudiced.

Bluey I: No I'm not –

Bluey II: You are. How many words did you speak to the guy? Three? And you've arrived at the conclusion that he's a freaky bum.

Bluey I: Well, I didn't say that ...

Bluey II: Yes you did. You condemned the poor bastard. How would you like to be locked up in some other guy's head? Huh?

Hey, is this a private conversation or can anyone like, join in?

Bluey felt a jolt of outrage. *Hey, I thought you couldn't read my mind?*

I can't. I just picked up your SC frequencies.

What do you mean? demanded Bluey.

Well, when you, like, think, your brain gives off mental waves, sort of, and I can feel 'em from in here. But I can't translate 'em into speech.

Great, replied Bluey sourly. *So what's it like? You enjoying those green wide-open spaces of my brain?*

There was a sound akin to laughter from somewhere inside. *Sure. It's like,* empty. *It was weird at first, but I'm getting used to it.*

Great. Delighted you're settling in. I'd love to chat all day, but I happen to be busy.

That right? Then I'll vanish. Sorry to bollix up your concentration.

There was silence behind Bluey's eyes. Had Louis gone? Or was he sitting there, silently listening to Bluey's thoughts? How long before he can read my mind? thought Bluey, paranoid as usual.

But he was to find that paranoia was justified.

Most of the time, Zem was relatively untroublesome. But one day, Bluey heard the voice in his head say: *Hey, Bluey man, you promised to wear my set. I ain't cruised since I got here. Put it on now, I wanna cruise.*

But ... I'm busy now.

You don't need to do that crap. Go home and plug in.

I can't just walk out. It sets a bad example –

Like shit. Do what I want. Go home and let me cruise. Go home, go home, GO HOME –

Zem was repeating the words, over and over, louder and louder, until they resounded through Bluey's brain, thunderous, deafening.

"Alright!" yelled Bluey, his hands pressed over his ears in vain. The clamour died. Shaking, Bluey left the cubicle and took the lift down. He took the slideway, terrified that at any moment the hellish voice would start again.

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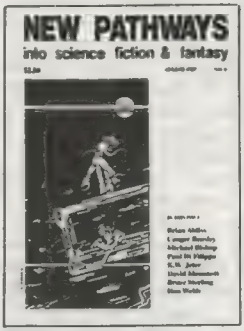

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He reached home, found the eyeset under a heap of dirty clothes. Clumsily, he fitted it.

Turn the switch on top, ordered Zem. Bluey obeyed.

First there was a blackness, blacker than the blackness of closed eyes. Then, slowly, flashes of light appeared, fading quickly, each time replaced by more lights, bright and multicoloured. Then a dazzling array of beams, green, red, gold, magenta, burst into existence, and Bluey was hit by a sudden sensation of incredible speed. He was borne along dark and hidden pathways at meteoric speeds by the ever-changing lights. The beams switched direction, curved back on themselves, executed elaborate turns at insane speeds, leaving a burning trail in the darkness. The nausea Bluey felt was not a churning of the gut but of the mind. He was losing all orientation, and the sensory deprivation of all but vision was unhinging his reason. A splinter of rationality told him to turn off the set. His hand would barely obey the command of his shackled brain. Desperately, he fought to bring his outstretched fingers to the contact –

The beams died: void returned.

Sensation began to creep back into Bluey's stunned brain. Uppermost was a savage pain, drumming in his cortexes. Then he became aware of words, slowly becoming intelligible.

Hey, what the hell happened? Where's the lights? Why'd you switch off for?

"I had to," croaked Bluey, not bothering to frame the words in his mind.

What the hell for? I was just starting to cruise. Normally I cruise for hours at a stretch.

"Well I'm not used to it. I can't take that. I'm not doing it again."

Yeah? I think you better change your mind, pal. Because if you don't, I'm in a position to change it for you.

With his disintegrating sanity, Bluey filed a complaint. He received the reply:

WE ARE SORRY, BUT RE-LOCATION IS IMPOSSIBLE AT THE PRESENT TIME, OWING TO SHORTAGE OF REPLACEMENT ACCOMMODATION.

Zem must have known of his host's attempts to get him evicted, but he took no action. He became more and more remote at each cruising. He rarely spoke to Bluey, but his presence was a threat that loomed over – within – Bluey's mind.

Then came the summoning.

BLUEY FITCHELL REPORT TO ZONE RBS16, BLOCK T30, ROOM J804, BLUEY FITCHELL REPORT ...

So he went, since he had no choice, and this time it was a woman.

"Hi. I'm 'Lene. I'm twenty, healthy in mind

and body, very friendly and compatible. My interests include music, aerobics, my body ..."

She and Zem became friends at once. It took some of the stress off Bluey. Sometimes he could sense them up there, roaming, giggling, but they usually ignored him. Sometimes they fouled things up for him. Once, Bluey picked up a girl, the first in months, but their lascivious giggling and lewd encouragements put him off his stride. The exercise was a failure, and the girl never left her number.

The cruising with the lights was still a trauma for Bluey. Zem and 'Lene did it in tandem; it was their substitute for sex. The frustration they felt at the denial of sex manifested itself in savage headaches for Bluey. His head was full of varicoloured lights, and thought was becoming rare.

Then one day ...

BLUEY FITCHELL REPORT TO ...

... and he got a third. This time it was quite a different type. Quiet, diffident and slightly bookish. Alfred Wexner was very little trouble. He had been homeless for twelve years, so was delighted with his new accommodation. Sometimes Bluey managed to unwind enough to have little conversations with him, but the more he got to know Wexner, the less Bluey wanted to talk to him; the guy had a mind like a *sewer*. In normal circumstances it probably wouldn't have been noticeable, but Wexner was no longer in a position to hide his sordid personality, and Bluey occasionally caught a whiff of the old man's mind, as if drifted through his own ... It made his cortexes shudder.

A month later, Bluey was sitting in his room, leafing through the Sheet, a free publication devoted to full-frontal nudes, gossip, and lots of exclamation points. His tenancy now numbered four, the latest acquisition being an ex bag-lady named Sara. Bluey's jaded eye drifted over the columned of classified ads ... Partner required ... Unusual interests ... And so on. And then his eye fell on something different.

DO YOUR TENANTS GIVE YOU A HEADACHE? CALL US ON 641780-P FOR AFFORDABLE REMOVAL SERVICE.

Bluey stared at the ad. Did it really mean what it seemed to mean? It had to! Private rented digs were almost non-existent, as legislation had banned any individual from owning more than a minimum of living space. His lungs wheezed with excitement. He would be short of breath for an hour now, the air-conditioning was so bad. But he didn't care. Eagerly, he picked up the phone and dialled the number. The phone at the other end bleeped endlessly. Bluey began to sweat, and his breath rasped in his ear as he wheezed into the mouthpiece. He strove to control his breathing: it might alert Zem and the others.

"Professional Eviction Services."

Spent air escaped his lungs in a rush of relief. "Muh ... My name's Fitchell. I ... have some tenants I'd like removed."

"Our fee is $200 per tenant."

Bluey gulped. "That's fine. I'd like four, er, removed. As soon as possible."

"That's okay. Be at basement 199 tomorrow at 1100."

A click, and the whirr of a dead line. Bluey hung up, feeling hunted. Had Zem heard any of that? Wexner and Sara wouldn't have understood it, but Zem was shrewd. How much of Bluey's private thoughts and conversations could he and 'Lene really hear?

Zem's voice cut in, like an electric shock to the brain.

How you doin' Bluey, pal?

Oh, fine, fine ...

Good to hear. Hey, me and 'Lene reckon it's time for a little cruisin'. What do you say?

So he activated the pyrotechnic roller-coaster, and blanked out his mind in darkness and light.

Bluey was standing in basement 199, nervous but hopeful.

"Wait here," grunted the tall blond man who had admitted him. He disappeared into an adjoining room. Bluey peered about him. The walls oozed a metallic damp. Several large filing cabinets rusted along one wall. On a small desk a VDU and computer stood amidst a clutter of grey recycled paper.

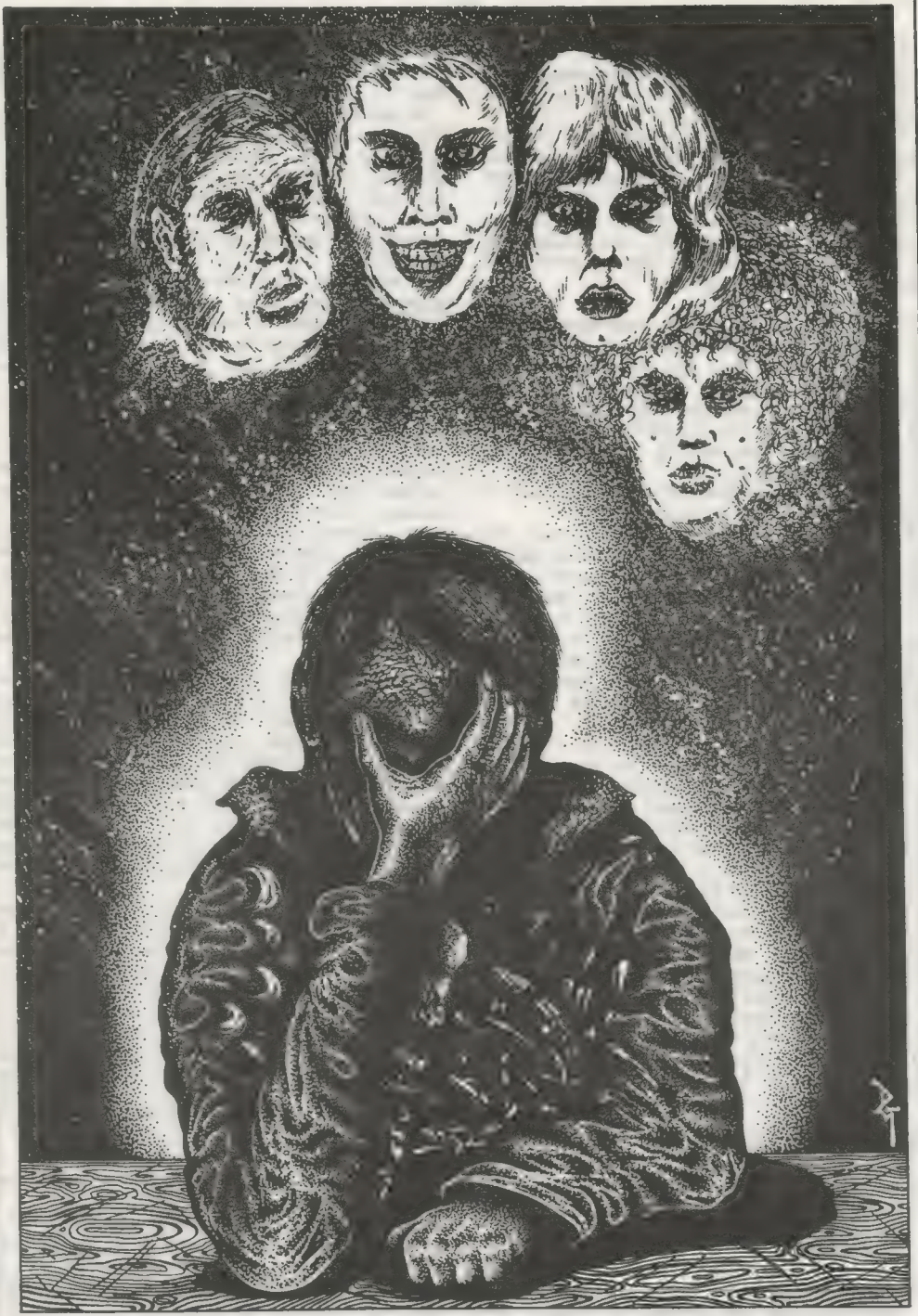
The door of the adjoining room opened, and a man emerged. He was wiry, wearing synthetic leather trousers, a t-shirt, and a pair of incredibly dark glasses.

"I'm Fanton," he said, smiling sardonically, as if he considered Bluey naive enough to believe him. "We talked on the phone. I understand you said you wanted four tenants removed. I think that should come to about -" he rolled his eyes behind their black lenses to heaven in mock calculation, while his grin broadened "- eight hundred dollars."

Bluey groped for the money. He had barely enough. Trembling, he handed it to Fanton, who placed it in a neat pile on the table. "Let's go. We got your records and mind-print from the City computer." He indicated the humble machine on the desk with a negligent gesture. "It's a heap, but it's useful for breaking into data-banks. Let's go."

Fanton led the way into the other room. Bluey and the blond man followed.

Inside was a set-up similar to that at the



hospital. "You know the drill," said Fanton. Bluey nodded, and entered the compartment.

"Gene is our top removals man," said Fanton, flashing Bluey a grin.

"What will he do?" demanded Bluey, looking anxiously at Gene, who was standing in front of a crooked mirror and running a hand through his spiked hair.

"That's too complicated to explain in layman's terms," said Fanton, and closed the door. Bluey sat, shrinking into himself, and prayed to an obsolescent God.

A fleeting sensation of non-existence, like a really weird trip, and Gene found himself on the inside looking out. He could never quite get used to the utter strangeness of the mind's interior. It was so unlike anything on the outside that it couldn't be properly described; there was nothing to compare it to, no anchor to reality.

Cautiously, he moved off. Get the feel of things, then start searching ...

Not hurrying, Gene began to test the wavelengths within Bluey's mind. Low mental activity on the host's part - so not much interference. He grinned with his consciousness; he felt Bluey's fear drifting tenuously through the waves like strands of mist.

Then he traced one. Not far away, the unmistakable presence of a mind. He followed its wavelength, stifling his own as best he could.

The mind was nearer than he thought. Surprised, gene quickly tuned his own mind to the other's wavelength, and using his superior mental energy, seized it, and hurled it away, out of Bluey's mind. It was a hurried, clumsy move: a fragment of the mind had broken off at the violence of the eviction ... But at least that was one less to deal with.

The mind of Alfred Wexner had felt something seize it. Before he could even frame a protest, Wexner was cast screaming into infinite nothingness, for all time.

The scream died. Gene moved on.

He detected something behind him, a long way off. He turned towards it, but it receded. So he'd been discovered. What the hell, plenty of time to deal with them later.

He picked up a new wavelength.

Hello! it said. *Are you new? My name's Sara. Call me -*

He didn't wait to hear what she wanted to be called. This time he grasped her firmly, and evicted her cleanly.

The scream died. Gene moved on.

And turned.

Now there were two presences, two minds tracking his. He smiled again, ghostlike.

Following now, he located the minds. He'd have to take them one at a time, since his own mind couldn't handle two wavelengths at once.

He selected what he suspected was a girl's mind. He was coming to recognise waves; women's were generally smoother, less tangled. Feminine placidity, he reckoned. Leisurely now, he latched on to her mind. They'd spotted him alright. Did they guess his purpose? No matter if they did. They could do nothing.

It was then that two minds seized his, an impossible range away, and consigned Gene to the fate of Wexner and Sara. It was a fate worse than death. It was eternal consciousness all alone. It was in fact hell. Zem and 'Lene derived much pleasure from the knowledge.

The scream died. Gene didn't.

Fanton was standing in front of the monitor. Its blip died. He tore off his incredibly dark glasses. "Gene!" he roared.

The followed a long, silent interregnum.

Finally, Fanton rose, and went to the machine. He let Bluey out, then turned away, resuming his slumped position on the floor.

"What happened?" said Bluey hollowly. Fanton made no reply. So Zem answered instead.

Your little devious plan failed, pal. Your friend threw Alf and Sara out, but he didn't get us. You see, we figured out, me and 'Lene, we figured out how to tune in on people's wavelengths like he did, and there's two of us, so we were stronger than him. We grabbed him before he was ready to take defensive action. You see, you can't just throw us out. We got rights, Mr Devious-Devious. The Accommodation people, they put us here to stay.

Slowly, Fanton got to his feet. His eyes were a little wild, but Bluey noticed a strange discolouration of the whites, which was doubtless why Fanton hid them behind the shades, now lying forgotten on the floor.

"Where the hell am I gonna find someone to replace Gene?" A little trill of fury trembled his voice. "You know he had a unique talent with that stunt he pulled in your mind? You know how much I stood to make when everyone has a pack of fucking assholes in their heads? You ever think -"

At this point, something happened to Fanton which caused him to utter a gurgling scream, clutching at his temples.

That was me and 'Lene again, Bluey, explained Zem. *We can seize on to anyone's wavelength now, and twist it around all we like. Pity he's too far out of range to tear that skunk mind out of his head. But he's a*

lot better person already. Let's go.

They left, skirting Fanton, whose discoloured eyes were downcast and dull. His mind was turned inwards, not for SC, just staring emptily at the ruins of itself.

Zem and 'Lene were happy – they had solved the problem of reproduction. For a long time they had been unable to make love; now, however, the difficulty was solved. Although they could not of course couple in a physical sense, they had found a means of tuning into each other's mental wavelengths, and merging their minds ecstatically. In this way, they succeeded in having children – not gurgling, laughing bundles of pure joy, but tiny unformed minds, minute particles of consciousness. Soon there was a sizeable family, and the kids' parents taught them how to tune in on people's wavelengths, and make them do what they wanted.

Time passed, and eventually Bluey died (though he was not really very old). The family had made provision for this, and had perfected the technique of mind-transference. The whole flock made the trek across the awful grey void in which the lost minds of failed transferences and evictions howled, to the brain of a young, vigorous fellow with only three tenants. They got their new host to wear the eyeset, just as they had done to the old one, and the whole family cruised the silver pathways, shrieking with delight.

Time passed, and the children's children spread out over what had once been called the green, wide-open spaces of the mind. Occasionally, the peace and quiet of the community – of the civilization they were building – was rudely shattered by the sudden entrance of one of the Lost Minds from beyond the Grey Void. The gibbering thing was always firmly cast back, then a brief sombre ceremony was held, lamenting the harshness of fate.

Sometimes, when a child was being tucked up in bed by its mother, it would ask: "Mummy, what lives in the Grey Void? It can't just be where the Mad Ones roam. Perhaps there's other worlds!" And the mother would reply: "Nonsense, dear, there's nothing in the Grey Void. The world and the people are the only things in the universe. Go to sleep now."

THE END

Matthew Dickens is 19 and comes from Taunton in Somerset. This is his first appearance in *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE.*

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interzone

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HOCUS

Don Webb

I noticed that Hocus had stopped speaking. I had been watching *History of Ballooning* on channel 39. It was boring but better than watching his grimy face.

"It's all I ever get anymore." He waved vaguely at the TV. I flipped through the channels. All forty showed *History of Ballooning*.

"Something must be wrong," I said.

He moved toward the window slowly, as though underwater. He stared through the flyspecks at his rusting Mustang. I could see the remains of his last five meals on his red terrycloth robe. I don't think he's taking Joan's absence well. I continued to play with the remote control. "You really ought to call the cable company."

"All I ever get is their answering machine. Everybody's on vacation."

I rose to turn off the TV but Hocus grabbed my arm. "We're coming up on an interesting part."

I sat and watched. A four-colour print showing a balloon burning filled the square. Suddenly the sound went out. Hocus began to giggle. "Real interesting."

"Why don't you have a shave or something? You're starting to smell."

He sniffed at his armpits and nodded solemnly. "I stink therefore I am."

"I'm leaving. I'll come back when you're sober and I'm less disgusted."

He grabbed me again. "Leave if you like, but I'm dead sober."

I pulled free. "Why don't you come back to the clinic?"

"Too many incurables."

"They need care too."

"They need drugs and strong shoulders to cry on."

"You had a strong shoulder."

"No, I thought I had a strong shoulder."

I sat down again. "So this is why?"

Hocus smiled and left the room. I heard him open the refrigerator. I didn't follow – the kitchen was filthy beyond words. He came back with two generic light beers. He offered. I declined. He opened both beers and plopped down in his naugahyde recliner.

"No, it's not the terminals."

"What then?"

"I can't buy any calendars." He took a swig on his beer. I waited. Finally he said: "I was in Walgreens two weeks ago – at least I think it was two weeks ago; time has no meaning in deep space. And I remembered that I'd torn the last page off my desk calendar months ago. Well it was July and calendars go on sale in July." He paused for another swig. Violent light from the television silently advertised Press-On nails. "So I picked up this blotter calendar along with my catfood, pine cleaner, Stephen King novel, head cleaner, High-Lighter. I charged it on my Visa. Well, this Palestinian-looking clerk ran my card through a little pink box I'd never noticed before.

The box gave a little Bronx cheer and the clerk said: 'I'm sorry, sir, we can't sell this calendar to you.'

"And I said: 'Why not?' 'cause I was thinking maybe Joannie hadn't turned her card in and I was over my limit.

"She said; 'According to our records your time is up.' I thought she was kidding and I said: 'Well, I guess I get this other stuff for free' and she said: 'Yes, sir, but I don't have to bag it.' So I bagged it and left expecting the store alarm to ring but nothing happened."

"She was having you on."

"I thought so at first. So I tried to buy a calendar at Walderbooks, then K-Mart, Eckerds, three or four other stores – no dice. When I got to the last store a security guard was waiting by the door. He intercepted me on the way in and said: 'Look, we don't like your kind here.'"

"Then you decided not to work at the clinic anymore," I said.

"I don't give up that easily. The next day I went to a little drugstore downtown – one that's always busy. I bought a calendar with cash. I almost kissed it when I got to my car. That night someone broke into my house and stole it. I heard them break the back window and crawl through. You can see the mud in the kitchen. I got my baseball bat, flung open the door and hit the light switch. *The lights didn't come on.* I saw a dark form against the back door as he let himself out. I ran toward him but tripped on a chair. Almost immediately the lights came on. The calendar had gone."

"You think all of this is some kind of a warning of impending death?" I said. He had started on the second beer.

"Not of death. I'm still alive, aren't I? No. That my *time* has run out. I can't influence events anymore. I'm history. I'm a memory."

"I'm here. You've influenced me enough to come here to ask you not to be crazy anymore."

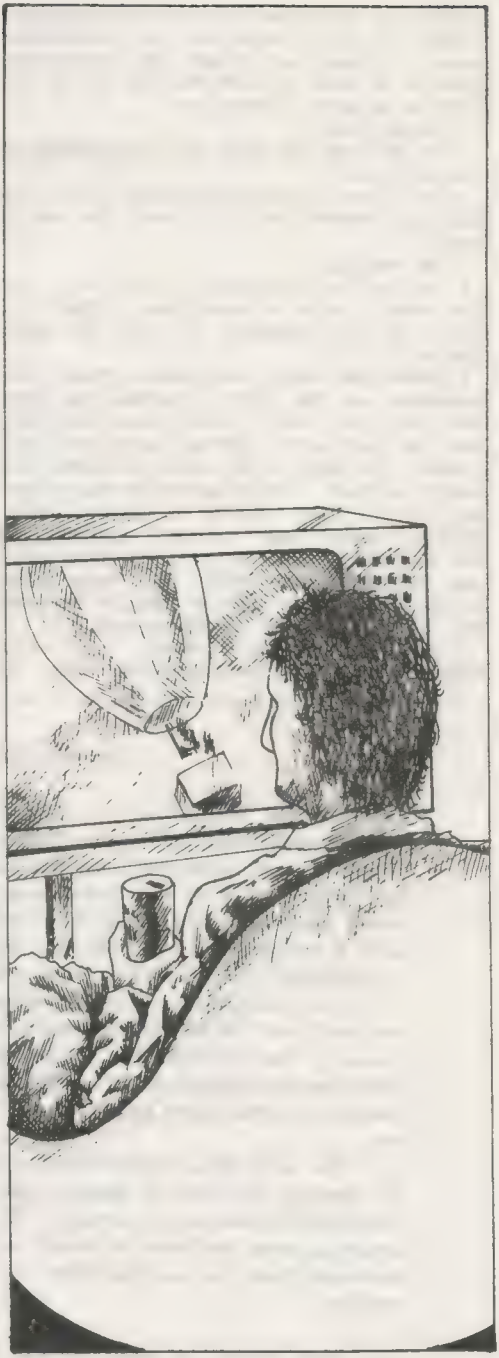
"No. You're spending the afternoon remembering someone you once knew."

Hocus stood and crossed to the window again. A cloud passed. An orange and white cat climbed onto the hood of his blue Mustang and curled up. The condensation from his beer can created a circle of thin mud on his window sill. He stared at the cat, but didn't seem to see it. I decided that if he offered me a beer again I'd take it.

"What did you mean about being in deep space?" I asked.

Another cloud went by.

"I figure I'm in deep space on a scout near



Cygnus. We were observing an overlarge Type G star – trying to work out its gravitational tides – when our scout, the *Narcissus*, detected a flash of infrared just as we fell into a singularity," Hocus said.

"A black hole."

"Yep. My time has gone. An infinitesimal *dT* crushed by *g*."

"If that were true you'd see the end of the universe before you fell into the centre point."

"I am seeing it."

I decided to get myself a beer. As I left the room I tried a weak joke: "Cheer up. After all, an epiphany is only one god's opinion."

I opened the dirty refrigerator. There were mudprints on the yellow linoleum; at least that much was true. I took a beer and went back the long way – through the angled hall. I opened the door to the guest bedroom; if it wasn't too bad, I might spend the night here, talk Hocus into seeing a shrink. VCRs, stereos, radios, tape recorders covered the bed and floor. All new. All with their price tags suspended by strings. There were liquor bottles and tins of gourmet food in the heap too. Hocus came from the living room.

"They were free. All of them. I went crazy when I found out everything was free," he said.

"You stole all this?"

"No. They were free."

"If they were free, you wouldn't mind if I took one home."

"You guys are all the same. Al tried to take a camcorder home yesterday. It corroded completely before he reached his car. Come on. I'll show you the pile."

I followed him to the front door. On the wooden porch lay a pile of sun-bleached black plastic, dented and rusted silicon chips, spaghetti wiring, and a scratched sun-purpled lens. Hocus pointed. I opened my beer. We were quiet for a while. Hocus looked triumphant. The cat slept. I turned to watch the *History of Ballooning*.

We went back inside.

THE END

Don Webb is a 28-year-old Texan. He first appeared in *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* issue #5 in 1986, and has been a regular contributor to the magazine since then. His fiction has appeared in over sixty magazines in the United States, Great Britain, France, Norway and India. He lives with his wife Rosemary in Austin.

THE WRITERS' BOOTSTRAP

THE WRITERS' BOOTSTRAP is a postal writer's workshop for mutual feedback and encouragement. It's similar to an orbiter, but with a faster turnaround because there's a central clearing house instead of a ring-a-ring-a-roses. You send me a story and I send you another writer's story in return. You pencil your comments on the text, supply a summary of what you thought, and send it back to me. I chip in with my own comments on your story when I get it back from your opposite number, and then return it to you.

The bootstrap gives you a forum to see how your work goes down. OK, you can't rely on any one person's opinion as gospel, but when you get two, three, or four opinions you maybe start to pick up a common drift. The bootstrap also sharpens up your objectivity, because all that midnight oil poured over the other guys' stories pays dividends when you re-examine your own.

Why am I doing this? Because I'm a writer too, and it's teaching me a lot. Anyhow, it's free, it doesn't cost you a bean, and provided you don't think you're Hemingway already, it'll be useful. All I ask is that when you review a story you turn it round in a week, because this is a cobweb-free zone and there's a guy just like you waiting at the other end of the postman...

Send your stories to: John Duffield, 24 Fordwich Rise, Hertford, SG14 2BE

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

Grace S. Wedderburn

If you were to look down at the arks from some very high place, you might think that they were gigantic bubbles spewed from the waves; gleaming, ephemeral things that will, at any second, vanish into the foam. Look more closely and you would see that they are man-made structures, as big as cities, which is in fact what they are. Self contained, beautiful cities with parks, gardens and towers. Perfect, ordered cities, floating on the sea, enclosed by single transparent domes. Then you would look to the land and wonder why the people - you assume they are people - which inhabit these aquatic cities, have abandoned the land in preference to the sea. For evidently the land is friendly to life. You can see beasts moving on the surface of the plains and the bright flash of a bird's wing in the deep, green forest. Why then, you wonder, have the people encased themselves in great, glass cocoons? Of course, you can see the beauty of the floating cities; but the life on the land looks infinitely more attractive: more exciting and varied. But perhaps they are imprisoned in these exotic glass cages and have no choice but to float eternally on the oceans.

Dear Iguana,

So, despite my spots, you have chosen me as your compute-a-pal. It must be my wit and charm that won you over rather than my beauty!

I don't know what you think is wrong with your name - it could be a lot worse. Think of my name: Tiger! How can I be expected to live up to a name like that? It wasn't our fault that we were born at the time when they were reintroducing all those animals to the land. We got off fairly lightly - there's a boy in my class who's called Possum. He has a very hard time. The vagaries of fashion.

Have you been on any trips to the land? We went to one of my father's tropical rain forests (he's an environmental reconstruction-ist) which is one of the oldest projects, second only to the sea of course. It was very strange, so dark and still. Some of the creatures are really revolting - horrid slimy things. I would have thought we could manage quite well without them. We have also been to the African plains. The lions there looked very mangy beasts compared to those in the Colosseum.

Do you have Lion and Unicorn fights on Ark 4? Did you know that the unicorns are genetically engineered, like the centaurs? I love the centaurs - they have such sad, beautiful faces. My father says they will all have to be put down when we return to the land. Everything, he says, must be as it was in the beginning. He said we must take responsibility for the monsters we have created and not inflict them on a world where they are alien. If we play at being Gods, we must be as ruthless as Gods. But perhaps they will work something out for the centaurs - it would be awful to destroy them all.

Off for two whole hours of Lev-Med now. BORING. One of the class is becoming so good that we have hardly sat down and already he is hovering above the ground, with a revolting grin on his face. Horrible swot. I do try, but really, I am not very good. I can't even get rid of the tiniest pimple. I've been told by my father that he will ban the Colosseum for six months if I don't improve. He got very serious and said, waggling his finger: "If we had not developed the powers of higher consciousness, through meditation and self hypnosis; as a race we might not have survived. Apart from that we haven't improved at all." His voice really booms when he gets excited.

I asked him, in order to change the subject, whether the centaurs could learn as we do - on the assumption that they have human minds. Give them knowledge and they would rebel from slavery.

Dear Iguana,

You know how you wish something terrible will happen at the Colosseum, although you feel sick just thinking about it? It happened on Saturday. The place was packed. You know that the centaurs, who do all the dirty work, are put in to stop the lions and unicorns from really killing each other? Well – a centaur had gone in with one of those long whips they have, and suddenly the lion sprang at him and buried its teeth and claws into the centaur's hind quarters. The blood formed pools in the sand. The centaur produced a long curved knife and with one stroke swiped off the lion's head. The unicorn just trotted off, with a stupid, smug expression on its face; as if he had killed the lion itself. I fear for the centaur – slaves don't get away with killing their master's pets. But you should have heard the crowd: the cheers must have been rocking the entire ark.

Iguana,

Of course I knew that there are shows for adults at the Colosseum. Of course I 'dare' to sneak into one. Of course I will tell you everything. But you might have to wait until my father is away. If he were to find out ...

Dear Iguana,

I've done it! And we weren't caught. I knew that sort of thing went on, the nymphs and satyrs and so on; but – REALLY! I shall tell you all.

We had great luck getting in. There was a demonstration outside one of the entrances. You know the sort of thing – equal rights for centaurs – impossible rubbish of course. There was some sort of tussle, someone was hit by a placard, and we managed to slip in during the disturbance.

You wouldn't believe how beautiful they had made the Colosseum. There were enormous mirrors attached to the dome reflecting the moonlight onto the arena. Bright enough to see; but dim enough to keep you guessing. Where there is normally just sand, they had trees and little streams which tumbled into dark pools. It looked very realistic. Beautiful and sinister: like a real wood. The tense, expectant silence was broken by the distant sound of pan-pipes. Then noiselessly, the nymphs appeared. They all ran to a deep pool and played in the water. The music got louder and faster. Creeping through the trees you could see the satyrs.

How explicit do I have to be? Oh, very well. Yes, they *are* as enormous as you have

heard. One might easily get an inferiority complex. Where *do* they find willing nymphs?

The music got still faster. With a yell the satyrs were upon the nymphs. They screamed and struggled, but not very convincingly. And then it begins. I am sure you can imagine the rest.

There was an old man sitting next to me, who asked me, breathlessly, if I had seen the 'Eden Show'. he said that the serpent was really something. I think it might be worth investigating later.

What amazes me, is why anyone should want to create such a grotesque creature as the satyr? Unless, of course, it was some nymph. My father says that these genetically engineered monsters are, I quote, abominations and ought never to have been created in the first place. "Intellectual curiosity being exploited for financial gain." They certainly must make a fortune at the Colosseum. My father will employ no centaurs; but it is difficult to avoid exploiting them indirectly, because they seem to do every unpleasant job on the ark.

I hope you don't have unpleasant dreams about satyrs. I hope even more you don't have *pleasant* dreams about satyrs. How can I compete?

Iguana,

We have just heard the news. It is miraculous that you have survived. My father actually saw it all happening. He was returning from his trip to the land and flying over Ark 4 at the time. He was furious about it: he said that it should never have happened. The ark apparently cracked open like an egg under the force of the tidal wave. It split the dome right across the middle and the water poured in. He could see the people scrambling around in panic or struggling in the water. But they were trapped. Soon the bodies started floating up through the fissure in the dome, and with them the debris from the city. They will be finding corpses for weeks.

There has been so much secrecy about it that we have no idea how many were killed. My father thinks there must have been a structural fault, and that they have kept quiet so as not to cause everyone else to panic. After all, as he says, the arks were not built to last for ever; only for such time as it took to make the land habitable again. The earliest were built to relieve the overpopulated cities and then more were constructed when the sea-level rose and the cities were flooded. Later, the plagues began and the pollution became worse: then they started building in earnest. Ark 4, obviously, was one of the first.

"So what," I asked, "are we doing still living on the arks, when the land is obviously ready for us?"

"That's the whole question," he roared. "What am I working for? Am I just making zoos, and pretty parks on the land, to entertain the children when they become bored with the Colosseum? While here, on the arks, we just become more selfish, more corrupt, and more ignorant about our dependence on the land and our responsibilities for it. Who wants the new life on the land? The people don't. They would rather have their freak shows than the terrible and beautiful things of the earth. And the politicians certainly don't. If you release the electorate to the land, your power will be dissipated. Better to keep your voters captured in a glass bowl, feed them and entertain them, and your power is safe. And all the time the seat of your power, the arks, are crumbling under the force of the greater, immutable powers; the wind and the sea; which over the centuries you have been able to ignore because they have been quietly serving you.

"We have the chance to start all over again. The world is fresh and young but have we learnt enough?" He was both sad and angry at once. I have never seen him like that. Senility setting in, I expect.

Personally, I don't see why they can't build new arks. We have everything we need here and it is so very much more beautiful and ordered and, given new arks, so much safer than the land. Imagine not having the protection of the dome: being exposed to the elements and the wild beasts? And what's wrong with using the land just for school trips? It does make a change: although, to be quite honest, I would rather have the Colosseum.

I hope I hear from you soon. Some of the survivors from Ark 4 are being sent here. perhaps you will be one of them and I will meet you at last. I must concentrate very hard and see if I can improve my complexion ...

THE END

Grace Wedderburn comes from Morayshire in Scotland. She makes her debut in this issue of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* with a story which was one of the runners up in the 1988 Albacon/Glasgow Herald Science Fiction/ Fantasy short story competition.

VARLAGS ARE STRANGE

Jeff VanderMeer

Captain Mitchell Davenport rode his craft through the stars and O! his hair was straight, his back unbowed, his soap opera jaw set against the eddies and swirls of space. Perilous space. Perilous Mitchell, for he of the steel-sharp eyes, he of feverish intent, careened from world to world, as unprotected as a star surfer plunging into Sol. Even the ignorant could spy the dedication in his face, the animation when he spoke of his appointed task: *EDUCATION.* Yes! Education and rehabilitation of the alien races of the universe, from pure energy Blip to cetacean Chronoscan. And lo!, in all things, he made his way to the heart of alien culture, became a part, a member, before disseminating his precious store of knowledge. Knowledge: the ambrosia of mortals! Or thus the great man thought.

Across the black back alleys of space, through bucking nebulae and beyond wrinkled white dwarfs, Davenport travelled, inhaling the sweet smell of his own sweet sweat in the cramped quarters of *Nirvana*, his trusty if rusty closet-class ship.

Until, eventually, Captain Mitchell Davenport came unto Merde, a planet in the Betelgeuse sector.

Merde was not the most unique planet in the universe, nor even the dullest. It was, at best, average. Average gravity. Normal temperatures. Slightly flatulent air. Bogs, swamps, roads.

Roads mainly due to the only sentient life form on Merde – the Varlag. Grey, sluglike, and, yes, low-to-the-ground, the Varlag frolicked in the slithy toves of Merde mud, slurping up nutrients from dead things that just happened to fall in front of them.

The Varlags were a strange lot. Their thought processes – utterly alien to our own – were said to make the sane man insane, the insane man excruciatingly more insane ... Theirs was a feudalistic society with painfully slow wars lasting sometimes in excess of five hundred years. At first glance, their lack of religion would make them appear cynical, but their necks never let them see the sky and, being myopic, there had never been much of an unknown to make guesses about, let alone a mythology.

All these facts Captain Mitchell Davenport reviewed as he smelled his incredibly well-scented armpits. No problem, his mind said. No problem, his body said. No problem, his vast computer full of neat recipes for progress – such as apple pie, Chevrolets, and nuclear war – said ...

Davenport landed in supreme self-confidence. His soap-opera jaw got out before him and opened the door for the rest of his body. He looked around, nodded, and placed the filter over his face. An adequate learning environment.

The scene he stared out at would have made an orchid shiver with delight. The bog was supersaturated with moisture, the tiny humidity gauge Davenport kept at his belt reading 1,000,000%, which was, of course, quite impossible and simply meant the sentient instrument had gone quite balmy.

The local equivalent of trees were short and stubby, with grey, moldy leaves and *"For Rent"* signs hanging from their short, stubby limbs (in Varlaguese, of course).

So out Captain Mitchell Davenport walked and O! the sun of his smile, the rainbow of his saliva, the dagger of his nose ... in short, he looked quite the picture of the post-Thalian Empire man. Full of good will was he and full of friendship and full of knowledge and full of ... If only there were a restroom, he thought fleetingly.

The Varlags greeted him as he knew they would – by sticking their asses in the air; a traditional sign of respect. The New French sociobiologists who had studied Varlags had, following a year of intense research, deter-

mined that "zeese frehndly, sparting tip ofv schaps ave zees pehculiar abit ofv steeking zeir bums up een a seegn ofv rehspect behcause zey arhe bazicahlly eeters ofv zee dehd et zee excrehment ..." (They were called back to headquarters and analyzed by a Freud Follower interested in the origins of aberrant hypotheses.)

In any event, Captain Mitchell Davenport, arms loaded down with technological goodies, was welcomed into the Varlag community. The Varlags slimed out of their peculiar dome-shaped houses to listen to his speeches, his ranting, raving jessejacksons as they were called. They clustered around him for days, eager listeners despite possessing no ears. And O!, Mitchell was happy and his followers were happy. And, lo!, one day, he was called to the chief Varlag's spit-and-mud hut where he was told that he was a great man and a good speaker and that he was to be immortalized in traditional Varlag fashion. Mitchell beamed and grinned and said "oh golly." Until he learned the price of immortality. Then the great lantern, the precious soap opera jaw, it shut and opened and shut again; and the valuable neck gulped, gulped some more ...

Varlags are strange. Captain Mitchell Davenport - conqueror of every variety of slithering, crawling, swimming, gliding, jogging, walking, flying, undulating sentient life form in the universe (whew!) - learned how truly alien aliens can be ... For, as had been done for time immemorial to the lucky few, the true geniuses of the Varlag mythos, Mitchell was skinned alive, treated, and fashioned into a toilet seat cover. Only the best for the Merde-dwellers' heroes.

A monument stands over "his" hut, erected by the sociobiologists who were never chosen for the honour. Perhaps the message there best sums up the story of the man, the lantern jaw, the eyes so steely sharp:

Here I lie,
broken-hearted.
Tried to teach
but only rotted.

THE END

Hailing from Gainesville, Florida, Jeff VanderMeer is an avid sports fan and plays a mean (if undisciplined) game of racquetball. He currently writes a speculative fiction column for *The Freelancer's Report* and edits a small press literary magazine, *Chimera Connections.*

THE SPEECH

Tom Farbman

Outside it was dark. Patches of light on the inside ... along the walls of the cell.

Everything was taboo. On a small table there were some odds and ends.

Jackman was seated motionless in the cell.

He could hear the footsteps coming toward him ... but he didn't react.

It was the officer and two others with him.

They stood there in front of the cell, in the dim light ...

The officer said to Jackman: "Well, what can you tell us?"

"I don't know anything," Jackman said.

"We picked you up in the street; you recall that much don't you?" the officer said.

Jackman hesitated, then just said: "Thank you."

"Loitering around the streets ... like a jackal," the officer said; the two men behind him smirked.

"I don't know; my name is Jackman," he responded.

"Jackal," the officer said. "Jackal."

Of course Jackman knew his own name; yet he had no papers to prove it.

Then the officer mumbled to the other two ... "jackal" ... and they began to howl and make noises like jackals.

Jackman still sat motionless. Already he was tired of this inquisition.

The officer and the two men withdrew. They continued to howl as they walked away.

He almost shouted at them: "Quit making those noises." But, he didn't. Might not be the right thing to do. Maybe he should stand up and ask them to shut up. No. Impossible. Just sounds in the darkness.

Then it stopped. He had to be careful. Possibly he should get up, walk around the cell. No. Not that either. There might be a reaction to that. maybe the lights would go off ... or something ... he didn't know.

Then he heard them. "Don't worry," they shouted, "tomorrow it will be better, you will hear a speech; long live Augustus the 77th, the 770th, etc ..."

"Who?" Jackman asked ... but not loud enough for them to hear.

A speech, huh? Well, that was okay ... good; then after they made their speech, he would make one too.

Outside, of course, it was different. Out there everyone was having a good time. They were singing, they were dancing ... if that was such a big deal.

Then he heard a shout. "Jackman." That was his name. There. They were coming around to his way of thinking. Yes. He was resisting them.

That was good; but then something moved. he heard it. It moved by the cell, then stopped. He wanted to say: "What was that?" But he didn't. Whatever it was, it lay there, barely perceptible by the cell door.

At least it was outside the cell. He wouldn't worry about it. None of his business.

He could make it out. It was the head of an animal. A hyena or jackal.

"All this," he thought, "simply because he had been roving around the streets ... all this goddam ..."

The eyes of the jackal seemed to gleam when he said 'goddam'. All was still. Jackman and the jackal ... but yet tomorrow, there would be a speech.

He slept where he was. When he woke up, the officer stood in front of the cell; the skull was no longer there.

"I'm awake," Jackman said quickly to the officer.

The officer was wearing what was probably full dress. Apparently, the speech was important.

"You've requested that I make a speech," the officer said.

"Not me," said Jackman.

"Then ... you're opposed to speech-making; certainly you prefer that to loitering about in the infernal fog."

Jackman didn't have time to answer. The officer's speech had begun.

"To the right hand corner of the universe, to the left hand corner of the universe, including all ball parks, cow pastures, city squares and solar systems ..."

Jackman got up; he walked to the small window. As the officer's speech continued, Jackman remained at the window. Outside, beyond the facility, it was as usual ... but yet, in the traffic, in the feeling of things ... it was as if it was all occurring to the officer's speech.

Jackman tapped on the wall lightly, just to drown out the words.

The day wore on. The speech wore on. "To those in attendance, to those who have ears who will listen to what they must hear."

He would never shut up. Never. He had always been speaking. He had been going on ever since ... "once upon a time". Since and before that ...

Jackman watched the mechanical motion outside; outside; was he really getting used to the speech already? Had he always been hearing it?

He almost wanted to laugh. Then ... finally, late in the afternoon, the officer stopped ... he cleared his throat. He looked at his watch. Another day already. Then he said to Jackman: "That was a short preamble to the substantial matter of the speech ... it will continue for a few more days ... at that time, a decision will be made concerning you."

"Sure," said Jackman.

"Tell me," the officer said, "have you been having nightmares; it happens sometimes."

"No, I don't remember my dreams," Jackman said.

"Too bad," the officer replied.

"Wait ... now I ... remember ... an animal skull ... last night ... there ... on the floor," Jackman said.

"Ridiculous," the officer said, and walked off.

Another night in front of him. Already it was as if a routine was forming there in the cell. And so it was. Because that night, two jackal skulls appeared outside Jackman's cell. And the next day the officer returned to continue with the speech. And then again the third night there were three skulls. Then during the day ... the speech. However, on the fourth night the skulls again; but this time, there was a stake running through them; forming something like an animal totem pole.

And that morning, the fifth, the officer appeared a little earlier than usual.

He stood in front of the cell holding the animal heads.

"Do you think you can recite the speech back to me ... word for word?" he said.

"No ... but I have an idea," Jackman said to the officer who stood there holding the skulls. "Why don't you try peddling those on the street corner. They'd probably go over real well; sure, better than chestnuts or shishkebab. Why not?"

When Jackman said this; the officer merely remained fixed; the jackal heads on the stake turned towards Jackman ... glaring.

What? Had he said something improper, had he displayed a lack of respect for the officer?

The officer's eyes were bloodshot.

"You ... you," the officer said, "you ... you" four times.

Jackman was tired. He was feeling the strain of it all. And then it was as if there were five jackal heads ... as if the officer then was also a jackal.

Jackman said: "If you continue with the speech, I'll listen this time" ... but it was past that.

Footsteps were sounding ... toward the cell. Jackman was being led away. "Just don't look at them ..." he thought, the outside world wasn't so far away; doors closed behind them; of course already he could hear the sounds of the world outside ...

He felt his strength returning. But, more and more doors shut behind them.

And as they walked along he was beginning to hear the echoes of the speech. Jackman struggled. He broke from them ... he ran.

He could hear them behind him. He turned and shouted ... "What is this ... some sort of side-show?"

There was a silence. Maybe they didn't hear him. He shouted the same thing again only louder. "What ... is ... this ... some ... sort ... of ... side ... show?"

THE END

Tom Farbman is from Baltimore in the USA. "The Speech" is his second story for *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE*, having first appeared in issue #10 with "The Idol in the Office".

THE NEW CREATURES

MICHAEL COBLEY

Even with hands pushed deep in his coat pockets, Lindsay Rosse could feel his fingertips grow icy. The thigh-length coat was a thin affair suited more for commuter transit than dusty biting cold, but when Rosse stole it there had been no time for a comparative study. He curled his fingers into his palms and looked past the man in front at the desk a few metres away.

Dupree ApTech always conducted the first stage of its personnel selection in one of the dozens of empty hangars dying by the banks of the Clyde. Flexirole centres, built for an economic upturn that never came, prefabricated concrete and steel that maintained a constant internal environment. Outside was brilliant sunlight, inside the breath from a thousand mouths fumed grey wraiths that dissolved in the air.

Rosse studied the others standing in five lines growing from lamp-lit desks at the far end. Not too bad a crowd, he decided. Not quite glowing with health – someone's grating cough echoed around the interior – but the cream of humanity compared to last quarter's intake, in December. Then it seemed every tramp and vagrant in the west of Scotland had converged on Glasgow drawn by Agency promises of shelter, food and booze. Provided they stood in line with the rest.

The Greater Glasgow Relief Agency was a collaborative venture between Dupree ApTech, Praeger Associates and Tugame Systems. With the Strathdollar currency it made up the salient thrust of a joint illusion, the mirage of PR. Broadcast images of happy families enjoying corporate charity, young men fed hot meals and taught skills under watchful guidance. Smiling patients in spotless wards, wrinkled babies safe on white linen under glass. Vision of joy.

Back in December Rosse had watched it all on a scratchy community hall monitor, in the company of lice-ridden old men rotted to the nerve by bad booze, young men who were also old men, their arms smothering guts torn by withdrawal, women of all ages and all as lost as the men. The pictures on the screen mingled with the ruined faces around him, and it was as if a key turned in his mind ...

So Rosse had left the hall with its human shells, waded through drifts of powdery snow, past the partly-ruined Kelvingrove Museum, to reach Dupree's selection session. He spent over an hour waiting, shivering in line then scrawling guessed answers to unread questions. After which it took the medics ten minutes to discover his lice, psoriasis and severe bronchitis, and to disqualify him due to poor health. Out in the snow with the other derelicts, an icy decision had settled in his thoughts.

Voices were being raised at the table heading the adjacent queue. In the light of an anglepoise lamp arms were being waved, a fist shook at the man sitting behind the desk, calmly turning pages. Rosse watched with interest the security guards who drifted in gracefully from either side.

There were murmurs from in front, and the man before him straightened, turned and walked into the dimness beyond the desk. Rosse stepped forward, curbing an impulse to smile. As before there was no chair on the applicant's side of the desk. Rosse stooped to fill the forms with appropriate answers, those memorised from the Agency fiche library. The first questions only touched lightly on aspects of the applicant – name, date and place of birth, current status plus a few other details. After that came a page of questions on a wide range of subjects, arranged as if picked at random.

Next was a page of multiple choice questions, equally disordered. Then a page and a half of visual puzzles, half a page of media questions ...

An old man Rosse had met while working his Public Service had laughed, shaking his head when asked why he'd never applied.

"Doin' what, son? A tech? – me? ..."

Rosse said the old man, McNeish, knew a lot.

"Lot of what?"

"Well ... things."

McNeish shook his head again. "Listen, working for the corps is always risky. The only safe job for any of us is being a guard – ye get good food, yer own bed – clean, mind – and there's women ..."

Rosse kept silent, taking in the other's broad body and the battered shovel held in one big hand. McNeish chuckled, watching Rosse's face.

"Naw – digging rubble isn't the same as a corp guard's job. But I see you've got the iron in you. Well, did you know the Agency has a library in the Museum? No? Well time ye did ..."

As Rosse completed page after page the man behind the desk dropped them into a scanner module at his elbow. A ribbon lead linked the scanner to a screen and a keyboard, watched and used by the company man, expressionless, immaculately dressed in a bodysuit as black as a silhouette.

Rosse watched the gloved hands slip the final page into the slot. Faint clattering came from within and the page jittered and was swallowed. The man's eyes switched from the monitor screen to Rosse's face.

"Fine. Follow the guard to the checkup."

From the hangar he passed through a steel sheet and girder corridor and into an annexe. It was like entering another country, the air was so abruptly warm with a vague layer of antiseptic. The guard, enigmatic in dark green bodysuit and reflective faceplate, paused in the open door, pointed wordlessly at the rows of vacant chairs. Then the door was easing shut leaving a few threads of cold air to brush against Rosse's face.

Pictures hung on white walls, blown-up photographs of production plants and installations, soft-lit by ceiling spots. Every installation was built into an inaccessible or fortress-like geographical feature: hilltops, mountainsides, cliffs. He walked round the waiting room, reading the gold-lettered plaques attached to each frame. Every title phrase began with the words *"Dupree ApTech Facility ..."*

Minutes passed before a machine voice in the ceiling spoke his name, asked him to proceed. Sliding doors in the wall opposite the entrance parted to reveal a passage. It led him through turns and switchbacks, along sections of corridor whose subdued decor flowed from colour to colour between one corner and the next. He began to worry – last time he'd walked straight into an examination clinic.

Eventually he turned a corner into a dead end.

"Please continue," said a voice from nearby.

The dead end slid open and he stepped into cold air. As the barrier closed behind him he turned to find himself in a doorway gazing out at a snow-covered slope. Before panic set in someone shouted.

"Hey, you! C'mon, this way!"

To his right a guard stood at the corner of the building. Sunlight flashed from helmet and suit fastenings making him insectlike as he beckoned.

"Where's the medics and nurses?" Rosse said, feeling dread as he approached the guard.

"Everything's in the walls now." The voice was muffled, sounded vaguely English. "Some nurses got jumped last time. On you go."

Rosse shielded his eyes as he emerged into bright daylight and saw the waiting monorail cars, sleek, sky-blue and serene. faces watched him from beyond windows dazzled by the sun.

"So I've ..."

"You're not out front with the bums, so in you get!"

The other passengers tracked him with impassive looks as he thumbed the door pad. The car interior was air-conditioned, carpeted, with seats so comfortable Rosse sensed aches nestling in his arms and legs as soon as he reclined. Relaxed, he felt triumph. The choice he'd made three months past, and the acts committed, had been vindicated. Murder, to gain a place on a Public Service demolisher crew. Bribery and blackmail, to keep that place and receive medical treatment. Theft, for money and drugs.

He breathed on the window at which he sat and surface ventilation carried the condensation away, revealing his smile reflected in the glass.

The journey was silent, a smooth westward sweep through deserted villages and suburbs. Sunlight through trees strobed unevenly and cuttings and tunnels were mute explosions of shade and darkness. Curves and bends passed by with no sensations of shifting inertia, as if the land itself turned or leaped to allow an undeviating route.

After a short while hillsides crowded in from the right. The monorail increasingly followed old railway lines that cut a course along the thin strip of land between the hills and the Clyde. Dark brackened slopes grew toward a spur of rock outlined against the sky like a vast elephantine head, trunk slanting to the river. In seconds it was past, revealing a wide area of desolation marked by a black crag that reared up from the riverbank.

The rubble had been a large town clustered

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about the rocky outcrop crowned with fortifications. Rosse remembered its name from the waiting room gallery – *Dumbarton Rock Dupree ApTech Facility.* He just had time to see the grey of concrete against sheer black stone before the mouth of an illuminated tunnel opened in the earth and accepted the monorail.

A male guide met the passengers at the platform and took them up a spiral walkway. Its low roof was an endless grate pattern of a darker ochre than the wall tiles, offset at regular intervals by plants in pots of black stone. At a foyer he led them off through corridors with the swiftness of boredom and familiarity. He stopped before an ornamented, almost ceremonial brass door, turned and smiled so automatically Rosse imagined he heard a muffled click.

"We have some time to spare before the Discipline Options procedure can commence. In here is our facility's museum, art gallery and role of honour, so take a look round and familiarise yourself with some of our main achievements. Any questions?"

The crowd of men and women, strangers all, shuffled, shrugged. Someone asked where the washrooms were and the precision smile widened a notch.

"You'll find directions within the museum." He pulled open the door, hardly seeming to use any effort. "I'll be back in three quarters of an hour. By then the rest of you should have arrived from the city."

He held open the door and they filed in.

Rosse had seen some of the company history while wandering through the Agency's fiche library, and some faces he recognised. Big framed photographs of men and families, posed formal and grave, caught in black and white. The occasional monochrome shot of a proud owner laughing with cloth-capped employees, or peering into the rod and gear guts of baroque machinery.

Further on photography caught up with the picture subjects, giving colour, depth and texture of flesh to their faces. Models of machines under glass gave way to branch-like digressions as science divided and re-divided. In parallel the company stretched its skeleton and skin to grow new organs, extrude more subtle limbs in order to accommodate new acquisitions.

Rosse's steps from exhibit to exhibit covered less historical time as the pace of development quickened. There were wallcharts and displays, short documentaries on continual playback, computer graphics of biochem and biogenetic research. Multicoloured chains of DNA, worked on by tool molecules, curled and segmented at the edge of his sight as he came to the last few exhibits, labelled *Current Research.* In a transparent compartmented tank were examples of cell and nerve generation, frail networks of fibre in the form of stems and shoots of small plants and bushes. The petals of a pale, almost bleached rose enfolded themselves in fragile filigree.

The next tank contained samples of epidermal growth, sections of crocodile skin, snake skin, leopard pelt, cow hide. There was also a human hand looking somehow misshapen, like a glove, and an adult human face, just the front from hairline to chin. The mouth and eyes were closed, as if in peaceful sleep as it rested on a glass framework, face up.

The last tank was tall, had steps up one side to a narrow gantry. In it stood a human figure, without flesh, without muscles or organs, just a complete nervous system. The spinal cord hung from an empty cranial tracery, sprouting root-like branches that diverged and spread in fibril imitation of the human form.

Rosse smiled. From the moment he'd set foot in the waiting room back in the city, he felt he had entered a new country with a geography all its own. His hunches were confirmed by the last exhibit, motionless manifestation of a technology he could almost taste in the air.

The Smiling Guide appeared at the door and the museum's occupants moved towards him.

The Security Director's smile was gentle and utterly misleading.

"So these are the hard cases." He spoke with genial contempt. "Twenty-three hopefuls out of how many? – two hundred and nineteen? Well, all the fewer to disappoint."

Rosse felt uneasy.

"The situation is –" the Director went on, "– that our departmental intake quota for this quarter is three." He grinned, looked at them. "We can therefore be tough on you, and pick the best."

Rosse glanced to one side, met the gaze of another coldly sizing him up.

"However, there is an opportunity for you all to attain tenure of employment with our company. In collaboration with the Biogenetics Division, Security is initiating a special training programme, and you people are privileged to be its first trainees. Should you decide to volunteer."

Seated and silent, they watched him pace with hands clasped at his back.

"It is not an easy programme: in many ways it's tougher than our standard basic training. But the rewards are commensurately higher; all pay is in company scrip and successful

completion of the programme confers officer status and a bonus of company stock."

Money rose in echelons. The gap between regional currency and company scrip was bridgeable: shares in company stock belonged to an altogether different environment. Rosse relaxed and his smile reflected a shared sentiment. This was what he'd come to hear, this quiet portrayal of majesty, and when the courteous invitation for volunteers was made there were no dissenters, no doubters.

Their names were called, one by one they rose, walked to the anonymous door with its rippleglass window. Beyond the room Rosse was greeted by a balding middle-aged man wearing a short white coat over a dark blue trouser suit. The coat's chest pocket bore a small grey logo, a stylised double-helix worked into a snake biting its own tail.

As he hurried Rosse from the anteroom he introduced himself as Osvald Langen, senior researcher and principal liaison between the project committee and Bancroft, Biogenetic's Director.

"Welcome to our project, Mr Rosse," he said, guiding Rosse to a door bearing the words *Examinary One*. "In here the technicians will give you a thorough examination, collect specimens of skin, blood, urine, semen and the like. Nothing to worry over." Langen opened the door and Rosse nodded, mumbled thanks of some sort.

The phrase "thorough examination" was inadequate to what followed. He was politely but inexorably stripped and laid on a couch surfaced with a slab of dense black foam. It was warm to his skin. His three examiners worked in eery silence as they scrutinised every inch of his body. Hands and feet, legs and arms, from his scalp over his face and down to his groin, from his anus to the back of his neck. Their fingers drew nozzles and probes across his body's contours, feeding in precise quantities of anaesthetic, extracting samples of skin and blood. Over the hours his sense of touch dwindled to vague impressions acting through his muscles as he lay on his back.

They sat him up then attended to the vials and capsules containing fragments and droplets of himself. He pressed numb fingertips together, gazed at the little wounds covering his flesh, each an exact point in an enfolding array. He picked away a barely formed scab to watch blood fill the tiny pit, and felt nothing.

When feeling did prickle back from the feet and hands inward, they helped him to an adjacent room and dressed him in a one-piece gown, elasticated at the joints. He was strapped into a cycle exerciser which was then switched on. He noticed, as the machine oscillated, that his scrutinisers wore flesh-coloured pads on their throats and matching beads behind the ears. The trio traded looks in profusion and gazed at Rosse with gentle smiles, even when he was screaming at them to turn off the machine as they increased its speed. Afterwards, they gave him a sedative in a hot creamy drink.

He awoke to dimness, on his back, covered with a fresh-smelling quilt. Permeant light spread from the ceiling and he saw he was in a fair sized room, furnished in bland luxuriance. Then he recalled the painful rites, his panic and fear. He would have to be more relentless, less prone to shock, if he was to win that beckoning life of brightness and grandeur. He had to be ice and steel.

A woman's voice disrupted his thoughts, inviting him to sit at the console at the foot of the bed. He pulled on the silky one-piece overall draped across the desk monitor and positioned himself before it. The voice then told him that the next stage of the programme was a group of tests to determine his IQ and psychoprofile. Rosse suddenly felt fresh and awake and when asked if he wanted to commence immediately he agreed.

Tables of questions passed on and off the screen. With the quickly mastered joystick he manoeuvred a blue triform cursor, clicking the trigger to choose answers. Attention focussed him on the monitor, the rest of his surroundings fading with his myriad itching wounds, veiled in a three-way harmony of eye, hand and screen. Time turned and curled, put forth edges and sidetracks. He was vaguely aware of handling implements seeming like cutlery, vessels, cups, transferring amounts of substance from surface to mouth, chewing.

Then more stretches of uninterrupted work on the monitor. Hours were insubstantial numerics mounting up in a tiny box at a corner of the screen. Fatigue grew heavy at last, his concentration cracked from the edges inward, drifted out of control with iceflow grace. When his bed snagged him in comfort and warmth he muttered, like a charm before sleep, "... new country, a new country ..."

It was awareness of another's presence that woke him.

"Good morning, Lindsay. I'm Hannah."

Rosse paused for a moment, looking up at her as astonishment penetrated his thoughts. She was the single most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her face was small, neat, with amber-highlighted brown hair curling above eyes of pale blue, the skin of her face faintly pink. Like Langen she wore a white coat, but

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over a grey trousersuit. Her beauty, he decided through a haze of suspended thought, was more than just absence of imperfection.

She took him by the hand, led him from the room. She was his secretary, she explained, assigned to help him organise and maintain his daily routine.

"Routine?"

She nodded. "Morning workout with Tai Chi Chuan, then eat, then weights, jujitsu, eat again, leisure period, evening workout, and a biophysical before sleep." She saw the look on his face and squeezed his hand. "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. I did."

He looked at her with new respect as they walked down a mahogany-panelled corridor hung with framed computer graphics. The corridor was deserted as Hannah stopped at a pair of swing doors.

"So when do I start?"

"Right now." She pushed open one of the doors. "This is Senior Instructor Scobie; he'll be overseeing all your morning sessions. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

As she left he turned to greet Mr Scobie, and suppressed a groan. It was his Smiling Guide from the previous day, standing by a practice bench in the centre of a small gymnasium.

Scobie proved more considerate than Rosse had imagined and was genuinely sympathetic when his lack of fitness betrayed itself. Rosse almost felt a twinge of guilt as he lay gasping for breath with his side aching. When Hannah returned he felt at once tired and calm from a protracted series of breathing exercises.

Over breakfast and coffee they talked about the training programme. Details about her studded Rosse's perception, the way she brushed a stray hair behind an ear, how she fidgeted with the ends of her coat belt, or that smile that would half-close her eyes and light up her face. When the conversation turned to him and his background it was all he could do to fabricate something believable about the last three months.

Back in the gym the next set of exercises were directed by a wiry little Japanese man known to Rosse only as Mr MacDougal. With a smile as gentle as his insistence was inexhaustible, he tested Rosse's arms and legs till their muscles trembled and jumped and he was begging for rest. During one lull Osvald Langen appeared at the doors accompanied by a tall old woman. Her grey hair was tied back neatly over the collar of a pearly white quilted jacket that complemented pastel-blue slacks. Her aged face observed Rosse as Langen murmured to her.

Later, while eating an evening meal in Hannah's rooms, he mentioned the visit.

"Yes, that was Teresa Bancroft, Biogenetic's Director."

Rosse was thoughtful. "She seems very old —"

"For such an important post?" She arched an eyebrow. "Dupree ApTech's board only considers the individual's aptitudes, anything else is comparatively irrelevant. Remember the Current Research exhibits in the museum?"

"Yes."

"Most of it is out of date. Nothing like what we're engaged on at the moment, all of which Teresa Bancroft pioneered. She performed the first gene-spinning experiments back in '96, when she was with Lockheed-Thorn." She smiled, full of knowing. "And while *she's* been with Dupree more than five years, *your* period of employment stands at less than a day and a half!"

"Do I not get to relax after my food?"

"You can do that while walking me round the battlements."

"Any particular reason?"

"Oh yes," she said, clearing away dishes. "You'll be jogging along them tonight."

The parapet followed the old fortifications, around the crest of the Rock, dipping and crossing the cleft that divided the crown. At sunset the Clyde was a wide blackness, shot though with silver-edged ripples, curving to the Gareloch in the west and the estuary beyond. The night was bitterly cold. Later, after his biophysical examination, Rosse and Hannah made love.

To Rosse their growing intimacy was enigmatic. It was like the glass cube puzzle he'd bought at the Facility shop, a chunk of shining alloy riddled with winding wormholes filled with a transparent viscous fluid. Tilt it and a bead would emerge, roll along a channel and vanish back into its maze. Their relationship was like that. He learned about the Rock Facility, the company, the politics and issues of the upland domain, but whenever he felt he began to understand her, some act or disagreement would disarray his theory. Her body became increasingly familiar territory, while there remained some place in her perpetually veiled, a heartland with a secret alphabet, a quiet geometry.

His daily routine grew comforting, purposeful, he wore it like a garment. Day by day he progressed satisfyingly in fitness and combat skills. Teresa Bancroft, attended by the Security Director or Langen, would put in an appearance once or twice a week. Never a word spoken, she watched Rosse while someone ran a commentary on (he assumed) his physique.

Besides the tutors and Hannah he knew nobody else to speak to. Walking the levels and passages of the Facility with Hannah, he saw plenty of company employees: was introduced to none. The atmosphere invariably was one of serenity, despite the constant hurry of people. Rosse had initially expected to see some faces from the crowd of applicants he'd arrived with, but now realised he'd never known any of them, never recalled a single face.

One day Hannah took him out on the Clyde in a company launch. Rain came whipping down out of summer thunder clouds and they laughed together in the downpour, watching the river boil. After that he came to think of himself as a traveller riding a current that flowed uphill, carrying him steadily through the new country. He almost hoped his journey would never end.

Then one morning he woke to find Langen sitting by the console. His legs were crossed, one hand rested on the chair arm, the other balanced a flat black box on his knee.

"Morning, Mr Langen."

"Good morning. You must pardon me for this intrusion, but last night my department's commitment to the project came to fruition and we felt that your acclimatisation should commence as soon as possible."

Rosse dressed, listening as Langen flipped open the catches on his box but kept the lid closed.

"You remember the exhaustive screening you were given on arrival?" He smiled at Rosse's expression. "From those tissue samples we isolated your DNA and spun out the subcodes for your epidermis."

"Tech confuses me, Mr Langen," said Rosse, suddenly flashing on the memory of a human face suspended in a glass tank.

"No need to worry." Langen looked down, opened the box and brought out the gloves.

As soon as he took them in his hands Rosse knew who they were for, knew they'd fit perfectly. Examined up close the material was a complex mesh of silvery translucent ribbon, endlessly bifurcating in repeated patterns. Black spherules were junctions in the weave at regular intervals and hairfine wires trailed from those in the backs of the hand and fingers.

The wires gathered and disappeared into the box on Langen's lap. He gripped a black stone in one hand as he watched Rosse don the gloves.

"The main thrust of my department's research is using gene codes to build organisms in para-organic matter, in this case a high-pressure bioalloy. The gloves are pretty much a deconstructed facsimile of your hands' epidermal tissues, but accurate. Here."

Rosse caught the stone easily as Langen put a hand in the box, out of sight.

"Now try to crush it – use all your strength."

"Can't be done ..."

"Please, just do as I ask."

Rosse gripped the stone, felt the mesh etching his skin as he strained, as Langen watched in silence. He controlled his muscles as MacDougal taught him, focussing everything on the space bounded by fingers and palm. Pointless trying, he thought as perspiration broke out and cramp sent spikes into his hand.

"Now rest. Difficult, isn't it?"

"I guess so." He gave a smile, kneaded his hand.

"Next, I want you to sit the stone on your upturned palm, just let you hand relax, right to the tips of your fingers."

As he did so, Langen looked down into his box and the glove contracted at the wrist to hug the skin. The ribbon mesh was suddenly rigid, the digits and thumb curving in, slowly grasping the stone. Rosse felt no pressure, his fingers and hand enclosed, protected, as the stone cracked loudly. Splinters flew, shards crumbled and he tipped a trickle of dust and gravel on to the floor. The glove opened, became pliable again, and fragments fell.

"Just a demonstration, but a telling one don't you think?"

Rosse gazed at the gloves, turned them this way and that, smiled slightly and nodded.

Langen continued. "That was done with a simple mimic programme, but the facsimesh is really designed for use with nerve implants. We have a complete bodysheath, patterned after your own neurophysical configuration. We can nerve-splice you to it quite easily, but the operation is effectively irreversible." He leaned forward. "You would have to wear the bodysheath for the rest of your life.

"So – will you go ahead with the operation?"

Rosse sat on the bed, looking at his sheathed hands, looking at the dust and shattered rock on the floor.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Oh, yes."

Anaesthesia spread its clouds across his flesh. Sightless and semi-conscious, he imagined his skin was painlessly sublimating away, leaving him a creature of nerve, muscle and bone. One by one, point of ice germinated as nerve fibres were isolated and spliced to facsimesh nodes. His sense of balance, with blurred muscular awareness, indicated how his body was moved and positioned.

He awoke in his own bed, staring up at the

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ceiling, feeling the zones of sensitivity where skin was left uncovered: face, groin and buttocks. Hannah sat beside the bed, Langen standing behind her, watching.

It was three days before he was allowed to get up and move around, another two before he could resume the programme. The first day back in the gym was filled with aches, long strands of twingeing pain from muscles returning to exertion. Hannah's lovemaking that night combined frantic desire with experimentation. The juxtaposition of sensation between bare and sheathed skin heightened arousal. His new tactile sensitivity was of a completely different quality to that of bare flesh, paradoxically more diffuse and more intense at the same time. Hannah stroked the mesh, fascination in her eyes, and he heard/felt the skin of her thighs whisper against his hips. Afterwards she cried and wouldn't say why.

The programme's combat sessions shifted emphasis. Langen was on hand almost continuously, showing him how to adjust the mesh's force amplification with wrist controls. teaching him the bodysheath's limitations against certain forms of attack. MacDougal would smile beatifically as Rosse discovered the manner in which materials broke, the way some metals held up then shattered, how others buckled and stretched. Physical exercises became less a case of stamina, more that of fast efficient motion.

A fortnight after the operation the Security Director was waiting in the gym when he arrived for his morning workout. The Director motioned him to sit on the bench, and was silent for a moment before speaking.

"Firstly, you should know that you have completed the training stage of the programme. Yesterday was the last day and I speak for the joint committee when I say that your progress has been more than satisfactory."

"Thankyou, sir."

"The next, and final, stage is field tests. Originally these were to be conducted at the Rannoch Moor, up north." He sounded slightly regretful. "However, there have been ... developments. An Intelligence source has located an unregistered tight-beam relay within the Glasgow Cityzone perimeter. It almost certainly belongs to Praeger or Tugame, so Intelligence wants a monitor package in place as soon as possible, naturally. The Board has decided that the implementation unit will consist solely of those who have completed the joint committee's project. To date, they are one of my officers, and you, and one other."

Rosse was calm, assured. "When are we to leave, sir?"

The Director looked at him. "Today, early evening, after you've had some climbing tuition. This relay is at the top of Kelvingrove Museum's remaining tower, of all places."

A night sky of thick cloud bore the half-moon's sliding fragments of pale luminance, highlighting gently the tension in Hannah's face. Rosse paused in loading the station-wagon, saw silver points gleam in her eyes as she stood by the vehicle hangar exit, hunched in her coat. She smiled when he came over.

"You'll not worry about me! Promise?"

She nodded silently, quick little movements of the head. A fierce emotion stirred in him, taking him by surprise, and he reached out for her.

"I love you, hear me? *I love you* ..."

Voices called readiness, he left her and hurried to join the other two in the rear of the vehicle. The engine coughed and caught, the car lurched off the ramp and on to the road. Rosse looked back at Hannah dwindling in the dim exit that shrank against the black Rock receding into night's gloom.

The officer introduced himself as Lieutenant Davis and the other as Hughes, a woman. Davis had the thick build and idiosyncrasies Rosse associated with the word 'thug'. His contempt for the two trainees was scarcely veiled while Hughes, apart from taciturn replies to Davis' briefing, ignored the men for most of the journey.

From Dumbarton Rock they headed north towards Loch Lomond, reached Balloch and turned on to the Drymen road. A minibus was waiting at a river crossing to take them south through Milngavie and Bearsden. Wide stretches of wreckage and semi-demolition spread out to either side as they neared the cityzone. Electric lights brightened groups of dwellings occasionally, but always at a distance beyond barbed wire fences.

In a hidden road near the upper reaches of the River Kelvin, the waterproof equipment pack was unloaded as Rosse dressed in rubber suiting. He was to take the pack downriver to a rendezvous point near where the river passed the ruined museum, while the others passed through the road checkpoints. Once there, he and Hughes were to keep watch as Davis climbed the outside of the museum to reach the tower. So the plan went.

He was ten minutes late reaching the rendezvous. Stripped of the rubber suit he clambered up a bushy slope and crouched in cover at the edge of a car park strewn with weeds. The ramshackle museum's silhouette merged with that of tenements beyond, joined

by darkness. From the shadowy edge two forms hastened across the car park, and the night erupted.

Tracerfire came down converging shafts of spotlight to catch them in the open and send them flying. One landed in a sprawl and lay still, the other rolled unsteadily to his feet and took several steps before more shots found his legs. It was Davis, face alien with agony, still alive and trying to crawl towards Rosse.

Then that agony gave voice. He began to gasp and moan as he scrabbled and tore at his clothing, at his neck, at the hair on his scalp which suddenly caught fire. Rosse stared as Davis began a scream that choked off when convulsions seized his body. The spine arched, the jaw gaped in soundless torment, and the dark clothing burst into flame. Rosse paused long enough to see the other burning shape before scrambling away, back down to the river with terror caressing his skin.

He never knew how long that tireless moonless flight lasted. He remembered the river walkway ending at a path that led to a roadway, and that the sunrise filled the sky with blood. During the hours on foot he removed his clothing piece by piece till the cold air rushed through the mesh of feet and upper torso. Clean and sharp and strong, the sensations were rivulets scouring to heart and bone yet never deep enough to obliterate memory.

At some point sounds rose out of his surroundings to pierce his tactile cocoon and become voices.

"That's him!"

Hands, arms, trapped and wrapped his chest, neck. He lashed out and connected with something that cried out. Then a hardness clamped his upper arm and the world froze. Before consciousness spiralled away he saw, with vivid clarity, the oriental face of MacDougal looking down at him.

The Rock Facility had been attacked the same night as the ambush at the Museum, he was told while recovering in the company infirmary. Some personnel had died, a certain amount of 'irreplaceable development material' had been taken, and nobody seemed to know who the raiders had been. Rosse asked for Hannah to be allowed to visit him.

The next day his visitors, white-coated young techs from Biogenetics, told him that Director Bancroft had been among the casualties, along with five other female workers. The ambush had been carried out by Tugame marines, so it was reasonable to assume that the rogue relay dish was theirs. The attack on the Rock, however, was believed to have been the work of an American covert force. When Rosse asked for Hannah, the techs looked at one another, smiled and left.

When Osvald Langen called on him the next morning he just had time for a cheery hello before he was grabbed and pinned against the wall. Rosse hauled his bed over one-handed to barricade the door, and dragged Langen with him as he manoeuvred the wardrobe up against the bed. Then he promised to break Langen's arms and legs unless he told Rosse what had happened to Hannah, so Langen told him. Everything.

How the raid on the Rock had been by the American military, and how Hannah was their mole. That she murdered Bancroft and the five other women then took a launch from the anchorage and escaped under close escort.

He also told Rosse about the gene-spun creation slowly building itself parallel to the nervous system of the foetus growing in Hannah's womb, how it would make Rosse's son into something greater than humanity. And how the other five female personnel had been similarly pregnant.

Rosse tried to hear the words in different ways, tried to find a different meaning in them. When the security guards broke through the door, came over the bed, he was quiet, unresisting. Langen's words, precise and incisive as a cantrip, were true. He knew, *felt*, they were true. And it was as if a key turned slowly in his mind.

By the small window, the only source of illumination in the gloomy room, he stood gazing out at the Clyde flowing west, driven by vast unseen musculature. He was trying to think around the new country in which he now lived, back to a time before. But it was as if every cut and snick and sample extracted from his body had come together as an irreducible wound in his soul.

Behind him the door opened and closed. He knew who it would be without turning to see.

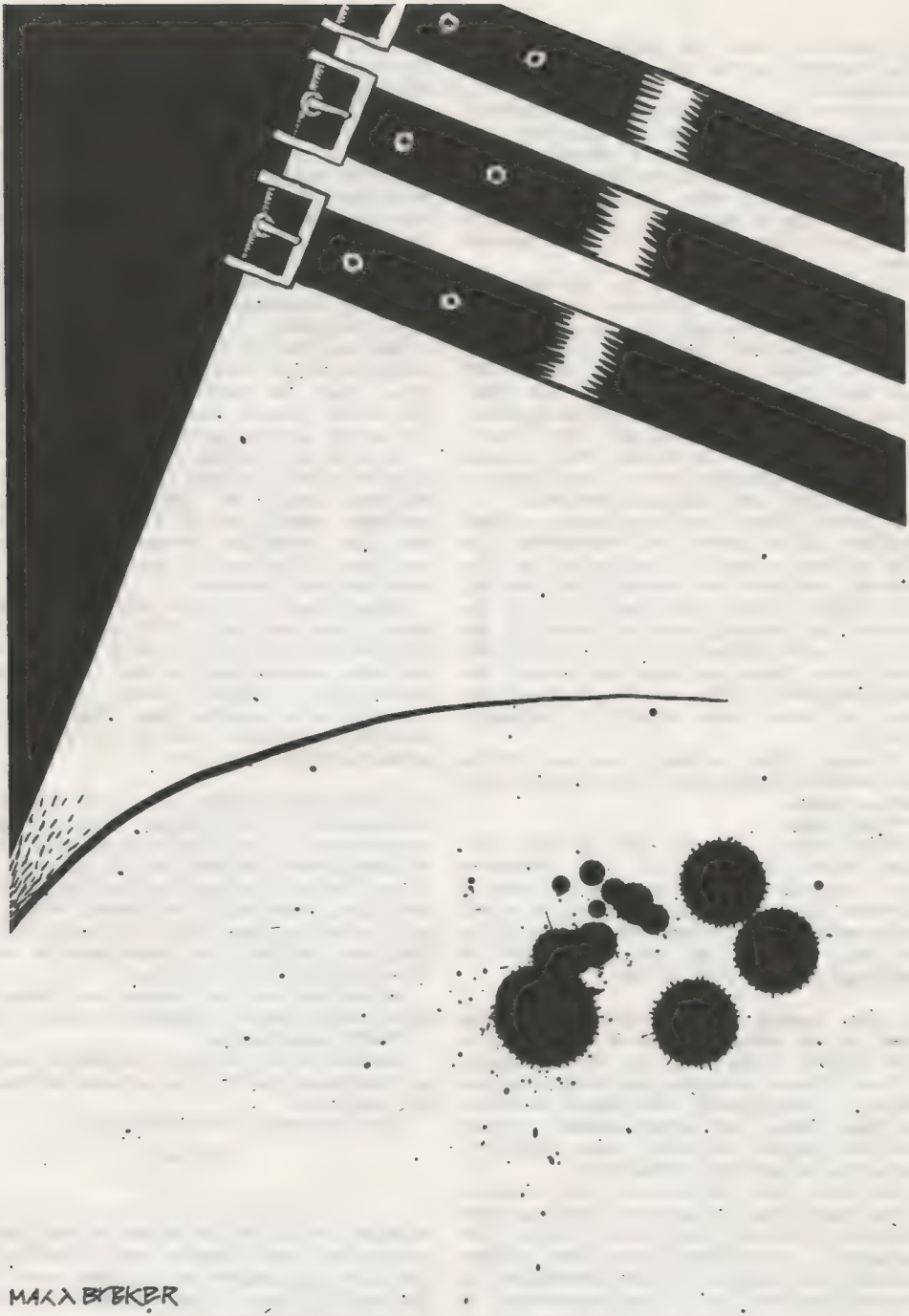
"Well?" said Langen.

Outside, from a sky grey as peace, rain fell on the river. Inside, Rosse's tears perished in the darkness.

"Yes," he said. "I'll go after her."

THE END

Michael Cobley is the editor of the critical broadsheet *Shark Tactics*, which he edits from his home in Glasgow. His fantasy story "The Recondite Rebus" was featured in *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* issue #8.


MARK BUKER

t. Winter - Damon

TEN DOORWAYS OF THE VELVET ANGEL

I awaken in a strange house. Obviously Victorian. Even before I open my eyes, I can sense rosewater, kerosine & poppysmoke. There is a peculiar stiffness in the air (I lack a better word ...). A feeling of elegance & decadence & suppression-just-waiting-to-explode-in-action (like stillness aching in the air, precursing the violence of tornado).

I awaken in a strange house. Ornate. & overstuffed. Curved lines & window seats & numerous small panes of glass & hexagons-in-wood. All gilt & velvet crimson velvet violet. A spiral staircase (so elaborately carved & figured) winds upwards into smoky darkness, winding winding up into the shadows ...

I awaken in a strange house. & I hear muffled voices growing stronger. A sudden wave of fear assaults me, unexpected, unexplainable. Lamplight flickers in the nearby hallway. The room is a billiards room. The obvious now manifest. There is a presence here, reeking of seductive evil ...

I seek out the sanctuary of a louvered closet (so very convenient, so unbelievably accessible for voyeuring ...).

A woman wearing a leopard's mask first enters (it is a mask, of that I think I'm certain). She wears black leather. Leather black as sleek & slithering sin, black as the desires she conjures. So much pale & creamy flesh is bared, taunting through the slits & sculptured omissions. (She can be no other than Madeleine-Laure, that wicked wicked daughter of Marquis, incarnation of The Whore of Babylon!).

Seven sleek & sinuous black cats. & seven white & petulant angoras. All throaty purrs & fish scent & gemstone eyes that glitter cruelly in the wavering wash of lamplight. Stalking slowly stalking they file in ...

I see now that there are two men in trousers & waistcoats bound securely to the felt surface of the billiard table. The cats leap gracefully onto the platform. Extend their thorny claws. & rake & rip the two men's clothes & flesh to tatters. Then they lick with raspy tongues, lapping lapping at the wounds.

& the woman in black leather sways sensuously forward. High heels clicking on polished, glossy wood. She opens a violet velvet pouch & scoops white crystals in her palm. Salt she rubs into their wounds. & the two men scream. Their stoicism shattered ...

Blond twins. Naked & nubile. Twins climb astride the cinctured victims. Twins force cue balls into moaning mouths. Then Madeleine-Laure supplies them with a pair of wire-&-leather muzzles. Twins force the supple cages into place & draw tight the buckles. The scent of poppysmoke boils thick & dreamy. The woman-in-black-leather brandishes a cue stick. Flails it down across the writhing mass of twins & tethered men. The makeshift whip whaps sharply. Screams & stifled screams & scattered cats. She brandishes the stick again. Again. Again. While soft & studied hands caress & raise limp roots in bold salute ...

TEN DOORWAYS OF THE VELVET ANGEL.

THE END

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t. Winter-Damon is a creative writing instructor from Tucson, Arizona, and has been published in numerous magazines on both sides of the Atlantic. He edits "Subway Artifacts", a regular review column in *Scavenger's Newsletter*. Current projects include a controversial "splatterpunk" novel series with Randy Chandler, an excerpt of which we will be featuring in the next issue of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE*.

THE GRAVE-DIGGER'S TALE

Simon Clark

"Jesus!" exclaimed the electrician as he levered the back off the big, one hundred cubic foot, chest freezer. "What did you have to dig them back up for?"

Weathered brown, whip-lean, sixty-plus, half-smoked cigarette behind one ear, the grave-digger grinned, displaying an uneven row of yellow chips that had once been teeth; he leaned forward, bare wrinkled elbows resting on the freezer lid.

"The new by-pass. It's going to take half the graveyard yonder, so before they lay the road, we have to lift 'em and plant 'em in the new municipal ground up Borough Road."

Pulling a face, the electrician wiped the palms of his hands on his overalls. "There must have been some ... some sights. Well, they've been dead years."

"Aye. First one were interred in 1836. So ... most of the coffins were well rotted. Soon as you tried to lift 'em" – he made a wet crackling sound – "they just folded – just folded like wet cardboard boxes. And everything – everything spilled out into a heap." The grave digger waited for the young man's reaction.

"Jesus." He wiped his mouth as if something small but extremely unpleasant had just buzzed into it. "You must have a strong stomach."

The grave-digger recognised the inflection in the young man's voice. Disquiet, distaste, unease. He eyed the electrician up and down. The floppy white hat, slack mouth and wide-eyed gormless look signalled, here was a lad who'd believe anything; the kind that cropped up on every factory floor, in every shop and office, who, when asked, would conscientiously hurry to the storeman to ask for the long-wait, or the jar of elbow-grease, or packet of Featherlite. The grave-digger had been steeling himself for a dull afternoon of ten Woodbines, five cups of tea and a solo darts tournament, but a faulty freezer in the cemetery store-cum-restroom, and fate, had brought entertainment in the shape of the young electrician who was, realized the grave-digger, as green as he was cabbage-looking.

"I'm just brewing up. You'll want a wet when you've done."

"Oh ta. Trouble is with this unit, it's been too near the window. Direct sunlight makes them overheat. Shouldn't take long though."

He looked round the untidy, brick floored room. Spades, shovels, picks and rusting iron bars leaned into dusty corners, fading graveyard plans curled away from the corrugated iron walls; at the far end was a table cluttered with chipped mugs, cigarette cartons, stained milk bottles; above, an asbestos ceiling punctuated by dozens of tiny corpses – spiders that had died and been mummified by that dry air.

"Are the others out, you know, digging?" asked the electrician conversationally.

"Aye." The old man accurately tossed tea bags into two pint pots. "They're working up the top-side. Look." He pointed a yellow-brown nicotine stained finger. Through a grimy, cob-webbed window two men could be seen digging in the graveyard. "That's where they're going to plant James Hudson, the old Mayor. Top-side, you see, is where all your nobs are – doctors, solicitors, aldermen. Bottom-side is for your working folk and paupers."

"And that's where the new road's going through." The young man returned to work, prising at cables with a screwdriver.

"Aye ... that's where they all had to be dug up." The grave-digger licked his lips. "Dis-interred, aye." Taking the kettle from a solitary electric ring, he limped to the freezer top to fill the mugs with boiling water, then he paused, staring thoughtfully at the rising steam. "Aye, a bad business this dis-interring. You see some things so bad it makes you fair poorly. You know in some of the older graves, well, we opened coffins and found that they ..."

The electrician's eyes opened wide.

"Well. They'd moved."

"Moved? The bodies had moved?"

"Well sometimes, years ago, people were buried alive. Not deliberately of course. 'Spect some were in comas so deep they were certified dead. They buried them. Course, then they woke up." He glanced at the electrician to see if he appreciated its full significance. "No air, no light. They'd be suffocating, trying to fight their way out. But six feet down. No-one would ever hear 'em. There they screamed, fought, clawed at the lid, breathed up all the oxygen and then ... well, they died."

"What did they look like?"

"Oh ... terrible. You see, natural salts in

the soil preserve 'em, only turns 'em bright yellow. Apart from that they looked the same as the day they died. Like this." Eyes wide open, his face the distillation of pure terror, panic, the grave-digger hooked his brown fingers into talons and contorted his body as if twisted by unendurable agony. "They just freezed like that, like statues."

"Jesus ... that's awful."

"Oh, I've seen worse, lad."

"Wh-what was the worst you've seen." The young man gulped at his tea.

"Ah ... that was two days ago. When we disinterred Rose Burswick. When we opened the lid we saw ... ah no ... no." He shook his head gravely and slurped his tea. "No. It's so bad I can't bring myself to ... no."

But he did go on to describe others in lurid detail. "Old Walter Weltson. My uncle were grave-digger when they planted him - summer of 1946. Weltson was the fattest man in the county - twenty stone or more. It took so long to build a coffin that the meat-flies got him. Ah ... when we opened his coffin up it were like opening a box of long-grain rice. Couldn't see him. Just this mound of maggots all white and hard like dried rice. Then it rained. My God, I'll never eat rice-pudding again. Look." The grave-digger pointed to something small and white on the brick floor. "There's one. Must've trod it in on me boots." The grave-digger watched with satisfaction as the young man nervously peered at the white morsel.

"Oh Christ," he murmured, loosening his shirt collar. "Awful."

"Then there was ..." The grave-digger had stories involving worms, rats, even rabbits - "you see, the rabbits had tunnelled down and built nests in the coffins, and we found the baby rabbits scampering about inside the empty rib-cages" - and there were stories about valuable jewellery, about pennies on eyes - "of course when the eyeballs dried they stuck to the pennies, so when you lifted the pennies ..." - and then back to maggots and ... The grave-digger noticed the young man's attention had wandered, he even finished replacing the freezer back plate and swigged off his tea without really taking any notice of what he was being told.

Time to play the ace.

Sighing, the grave-digger lit the butt that had been tucked snugly behind his ear. "You know, I can't get that last one we dug up out of my mind. Aye, Rose Burswick."

The electrician's eyes focussed on the grave-digger. "You mean that really ... awful one?"

"Aye. The worst." Sombre faced, but inwardly gleeful, the grave-digger tragically put his head in his hands. "The worst ever. And I've seen some terrible things in my time."

The young man was hooked. "What happened?"

"Well. Promise you'll tell no-one."

"You can trust me, mister."

"Remember the old factory down by the river?"

"Yeah, that's the one that got sealed off with those radiation warning signs."

"That is because during World War One," the grave-digger jabbed the glowing tab into the air for emphasis, "that's where they painted luminous faces on watches, ships' instruments and such-like."

"Uh?"

"Then, what they used to make things luminous was radium. And radium is radio-active. They took girls, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, to apply this stuff to watch faces. Course, nobody knew what radiation did to you. At least they didn't. Most of the factory girls were dead before they were twenty - just rotted away. Rose Burswick worked there five years. She'd use a little brush to paint the radium on. trouble is it dried quick so she'd lick the brush every couple of minutes to keep it moist. Each time she did that, she must have swallowed a few flakes of radium."

"Jesus. It's a wonder it didn't kill her."

The grave-digger shrugged. "It did - at least that's what they said. In 1935 Rose Burswick was buried - she was thirty-six."

"Bet she was a mess, living that long after."

"Aye, but that's not the worst of it. Like I said, two days ago we opened the grave."

"Ugh ... what did you find?"

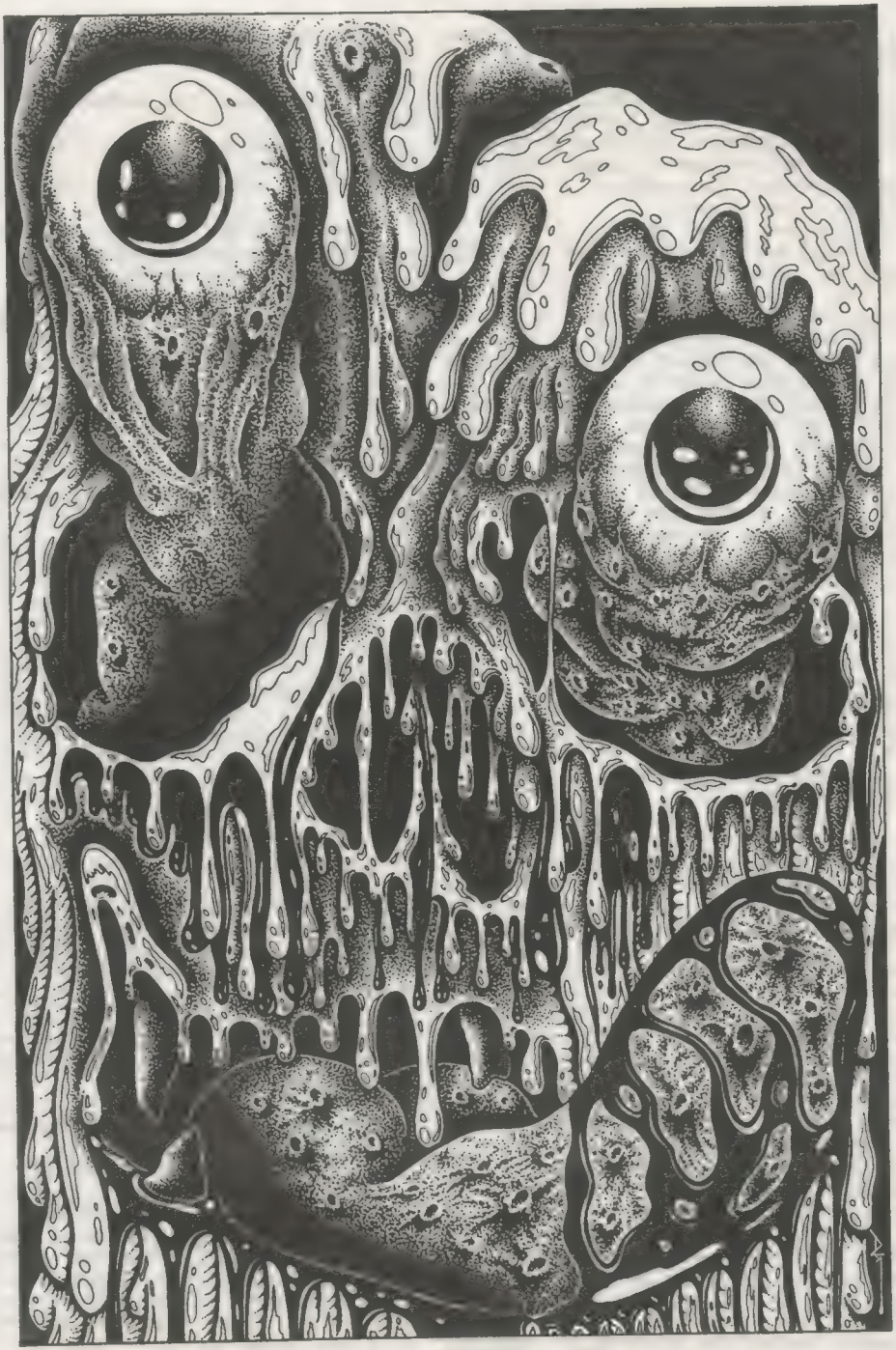
The grave-digger rubbed his eyes as if trying to erase some terrible image. "Well ... we lifted the coffin, it were intact. It was then I noticed where the lid met the coffin there was like this pale yellow trim round the edge. Funny, I thought, but reckoned it were just a bit of mold. Anyway, when we came to prise off the lid it - it just flew off, like the top off a Jack-in-a-box."

"Jesus Johnnie!"

"And inside ... inside it were full. Ram-jam full to the brim."

The electrician rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Full of what?"

The grave-digger shrugged. "Rose Burswick." He pulled on his cigarette, hard. "They say she weighed six stone when they buried her. But when we opened that coffin it were like opening a carton of ice cream. There were just this big block - bright yellow. It were as if it had grown and grown until the coffin



side had stopped it growing any bigger. But even then, pressure inside had been so great it were being forced through the crack between the lid and coffin, making that yellow trim. Course, we just thought it were some kind of fungus, so we tipped it out. It came out like a banana jelly from a mould. On the grass was that yellow block – coffin shaped."

"What – what'd happened to Rose Burswick?"

"Oh ... that's just it. It was Rose Burswick."

"Christ! How?"

"Mue–tay–shun." The grave–digger rolled the word around his mouth like a juicy morsel. "Mue–tay–shun. You see, the radiation'd caused her to mutate in the grave. The coffin had become her – her second womb. And she like ... gestated ... aye, evolved into something that – well – was not human."

"Did you touch it?"

"Not on your nelly. We ran like hell. But when the Cemetery Board found out, we had to go back to ... *IT*." The grave–digger leaned back against the freezer. "We found it had changed. Just sort of a soft mound and, aye, it had grown. Tuesday was that sunny day – scorching hot. The heat must have brought it on, and it were growing fast."

"Jesus. Then what?"

"We tried to lever it into a skip to take it down to the Crem. Burn it. But ... but it'd taken root. Mue–tay–shun caused what were left of the intestin' to grow and worm into the earth like a long yellow snake. It ended up us cutting it through with a shovel. She ... it screamed. Pain, real pain! God it were a nightmare. Then – then it were up and moving. What were left of her arms and legs had turned into like swollen yellow stumps with back–to–front feet and hands that had twisted up into hooves like ... oh, I tell you – revolting.

"It were growing dark and we were trying to get into the hut. That's when we noticed the worse part. I held the torch to it and looked at it close up. This yellow stuff were almost transparent, like yellow jelly and I – I could see inside it."

The young man's eyes bulged. "What ya see?"

"Terrible. Just under the surface, about four, maybe six inches down through this thick jelly, I could see – clearly see – Rose Burswick's face. Or what was left of it. Wide, staring eyes coming out of their sockets three inches or more like red raw sausages. The tongue ... long, thrusting out the mouth, up through the skin until the top wiggled all pink and wet above the surface. Aye, and the mouth ... opening, shutting like this." Wordlessly, he solemnly slapped his lips together like a goldfish. "I reckon she were trying to say something, call for help. You know, that expression on her face will stick in my mind for ever. Sheer terror, like – like a continual state of shock, as if she knew what had happened ... mue–tay–shun."

"What happened to it?"

"Well. It kept growing. So we had to find a way to stop it."

"And how ..." The electrician trailed off in horror as if guessing.

"Sub–zero temperatures." The grave–digger tapped the freezer lid with a nicotine stained forefinger. "Why else do you think that a cemetery store would keep a freezer." He began to lift the lid. "Look."

"No!" The electrician's voice rose to s shriek. Slamming the part–opened lid down, he tightly shut his eyes. "No!"

Enjoying himself hugely, the grave–digger kept a straight face but couldn't keep the mischievous twinkle from his eye. "Suit yourself."

"I–I–I've got to go. I'm late." The electrician snatched his tools together, then holding on to his limp, white hat he ran from the building.

The electrician was starting the van when the grave–digger hobbled breathlessly up.

"Hey ... oh my leg is giving me hell. Hey, you've forgotten this." The grave–digger waved the screwdriver in the air.

"Oh ta." Opening the door, the electrician hurriedly took the screwdriver and tossed it into the back.

"You know, as long as the freezer's working," said the grave–digger, "nothing'll happen. Old Rose Burswick is frozen solid – like a block of ice cream."

Something occurred to the electrician. "How long since the freezer packed in?"

"Ah ... let's see. I saw some water on the floor yesterday mornin', but Bill said, don't bother, it'll only be –"

"Jesus! It's been off more than twenty–four hours? You're lucky it didn't thaw." He suddenly looked hard at the grave–digger. "You've got it on fast–freeze, on full?"

"No. I haven't touched it. Thought you did."

"It's still switched *off!* Jesus Johnnie! Just pray we're in time." He jumped out of the van and hurried back in the direction of the hut, the grave–digger trailing behind and grumbling about his dicky leg.

Too late.

They heard a noise from inside like dozens of loose boards being knocked over, a succession of thumps, then with a loud crunch the twin doors burst open. And what had once been Rose Burswick, swelled and flowed

out on to the path. A mass of quivering yellow, the size of a beached whale, it moved as fast as a man could walk.

The grave-digger shouted a warning to the electrician, turned, then ran. The limp forgotten, he sprinted across the cemetery, leaping clean over headstones at such a hell of a rate it would have drawn murmurs of approval from any hundred metres hurdles champion.

Luck had deserted the electrician. Stumbling backwards over a mound of soil, he slipped and fell into Mayor Hudson's grave-to-be. Down at the bottom, the electrician opened his eyes to darkness. Something had blocked out the daylight. Looking up, he saw that covering the grave like a lid was the yellow form of Rose Burswick. For a second, the sun shone through the yellow to reveal shapes suspended in the translucent body, like fruit suspended in a dessert jelly – an arm, a leg, splinters of bone, distended internal organs. And a head. The head turned in the jelly, rotating slowly but smoothly until its face was turned, gradually, to the electrician.

From the fevered heat of panic to this picture of horror – his insides went to ice.

The face. That expression ...

At the bottom of the cemetery, the grave-digger scrambling over a brick wall, heard the muffled scream of terror. He wanted to go back and help, he really did, but something drove him from the cemetery as fast as his legs could carry him.

In the grave, the electrician's eyes were fixed on that face as Rose Burswick plopped into the hole.

And after more than sixty years of solitude in her cold and lonely grave, Rose Burswick hugged the handsome young man in the floppy white hat in an embrace that seemed to last for ever.

And that expression on her face stayed on the electrician's mind as if burnt there by fire.

She was smiling.

THE END

Simon Clark's first story for *BBR*, "... Beside the Seaside, Beside the Sea ..." from issue #4 and reprinted in the *Best of Back Brain Recluse* #1, was recently published in the United States in Daw's *Year's Best Horror* series. *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* will be publishing a special collection of new stories by Simon in the summer of 1989. "The Grave-Digger's Tale" first appeared in *Fear* magazine in January 1989.

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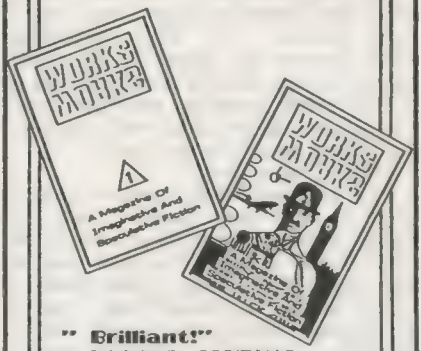

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LIFT

Neil K. Henderson

My friend Andrew Townley-Freeman once told me: "You can get something the size of Glasgow to fly – if you have enough lift." Of course, that was before we knew the truth about the Moon. We were in *Variform* at the time he said this. You must remember *Variform* – Glasgow's first floating nightclub. "Get high as a kite – fly *Variform* tonite!" the posters used to say. The prices were astronomical as well. But you'd pay almost anything for the novelty of being there – boozing and boogieing the night away in a building that hovered half a mile above the city. Talk about trendy! They'd have had queues right around the block if there was anywhere solid to stand. Elitist – that's the word.

Don't ask me how I could afford to be there. Let's just say I make a few quid here and there. And I was there on business – the flying building business. As ATF so astutely put it, it's all a question of lift. Of course, nowadays the sight of some massive stone-clad edifice flying south for the winter is something we take for granted. These days you don't catch a bus to go to the supermarket. You just catch a supermarket. And while you browse through the marrowfat peas, you could be hovering over Manchester or Birmingham for all you know. The same store can serve a vast area of consumers. (I should say *search* a vast areas *for* consumers, given the shortage of punters since the Great Murrain.)

I don't know about you, but it took me a long time to get used to this idea. What *was* this *lift*? How could these huge buildings stay up in the air without hurtling to the ground and mashing the odd innocent bystander (or underneath-stander, I should say) to a pulp? Whatever this *lift* was, it was worth money. A lot of money. I mean, once you have *lift*, you're free ... aren't you? You can dodge paying rates. Cross borders without interference. No political boundaries can hold you. You can go anywhere – land anywhere. Especially after the Great Murrain. You get my drift? No armies to object to your dumping a football stadium in the middle of the green belt, or whatever.

But the nature of this *lift* was a big secret, known only to its inventor and a handful of big businessmen. I wanted to know this secret, and I was willing to pay. I knew it was going to cost me dear, though of course this was well before the taxman caught on, and I was expecting a fairly straightforward sort of deal. If I'd known about lift-tax, superlift-tax and interstellar overtax, I don't think I'd have bothered.

Be that as it may, a few days after Andrew had introduced me to *Variform*, I was there again – alone this time, waiting for my very important and elusive contact. This man was one of the few in the know. I was expecting the arrival of no less a personage than Stannard Brassica. As I sat in the bar, waiting, a thousand questions flitted through the emporium of my mind. How much did he need to know? Would he do a deal if I didn't tell him the full story? Could I trust him, Would he trust me? The droning from the musical sensuality-box irritated me more, the more impatient I grew. I glanced round the airy interior. It always amazes me that flying buildings can afford to carry the extra weight of an interior, but there you are – I never was any good at science. I suppose it's all

got something to do with this *lift* Andrew Townley-Freeman spoke of.

This certainly was a smoothly-run joint. Sitting at my authentic replica table, I could see past the dietary fibre dispenser to where two efficient bar staff were removing the body of the last player to lose on the *Trivial Life* Russian roulette machine. The steady flow of queuing punters was only interrupted for the briefest moment. The next guy in line took his turn eagerly, and when he lost it was reassuring to note that his face still carried that look of cheerful expectancy, even after it had been hygienically removed from his neck by the machine's laser action.

"Sorry ... you lose," sympathised the electronic voice. "Better luck in the next world."

My concentration on this scene was suddenly broken by a loud wailing and screaming, which gradually abated to pitiful whimpering. The *Safe Sex Simulator* had gone on the blink. Someone was going to sue the owners of *Variform* for a lot of dough. What a mess! I had to turn away ... and I came face to face with none other than Stannard Brassica himself.

"Proton?" he asked, "Junter Proton?"

I had to admit it was me.

"Come on," he rasped, "this is no place to talk."

Without another word, we strolled over to the nearest French windows, looked at the two or three thousand feet of space between ourselves and the ground, and jumped. While we were in free-fall, I got the chance to take a proper look at this man, Brassica. I was falling slightly below him, so it was difficult to judge his outward dimensions. Certainly, he had hairy nostrils (I could see right up his nose), but whether he was large or small was difficult to estimate while plummeting to earth faster than Bob-your-uncle's whatsit. His overcoat seemed very baggy. It seemed to billow in the breeze of our falling. The bottom corner kept flapping. Was that a -? Was it ...? A seagull defecated in my eye. But nevertheless, I could have sworn that Brassica has a woman under his coat!

But there was no time to muse further on this strange new possibility, as the time had come to pull the ripcord of my parachutette - a simple enough matter normally, but not so easy when simultaneously wiping one's face with a handkerchief. Fortunately, I was only slightly too late at the crucial stage, and landed with a mere broken leg. One of the many advantages of putting buildings in the sky, as you will be aware, is the number of fascinating spin-off developments which have naturally followed. Where would I be now, for instance, without my *Immedioplaster* fracture repair kit? I was up and hobbling along beside Stannard Brassica in no time.

I couldn't help noticing that he also seemed to be walking with difficulty. "Excuse me, Mr Brassica," I said, "but I couldn't help wondering ... is that a woman you have under your overcoat?"

"So!" he ejaculated. "You noticed."

"It was difficult not to."

"Very well ... Desiree ... you may reveal yourself."

A beautiful woman emerged from Brassica's coat, and the three of us walked across the deserted tarmac. It was a hauntingly picturesque scene. Nothing for miles but tarmac, where once had been streets and houses. Only the occasional signboard hovering yards in the air served to break the monotony. The silhouette of *Variform* was dimly visible in the distance. The Great Murrain had taken its toll. And the *lift*? No-one had spoken for some time. The heat haze shimmered.

"Do you come here often?" I asked the young lady. She just looked at me.

"Listen, Proton," said Brassica, "I'm here on business. Get on with it."

I cast a glance at his companion.

"He doesn't trust me, Stan," she said.

"It's okay, Proton. My secretary is completely in my confidence."

I began to unfold my plan as we went. I now felt somewhat self-conscious. My limp was more noticeable now that Brassica's 'handicap' was walking on her own feet. "Bloody seagulls," I thought. However, Brassica seemed genuinely interested in my scheme, once I had explained it fully. He stopped dead several times and tugged his earlobes (and sometimes those of his secretary). When I had finished, we stood in the sunset, not speaking. Stannard Brassica broke the silence.

"I'm interested. Meet me at *Leicester's* tomorrow afternoon. I've got to buy a horse."

Leicester's multi-storey horse market. One of the latest wonders of the world. God alone knows how they got this thing to fly. I suppose they had to - it could never have supported its own weight on the ground. Tier upon tier rises this masterpiece, to a height beyond visible limit. Each level is crammed with restless and terror-stricken horseflesh. Every one a thoroughbred. Thousands of them forced into flimsy wire stalls, cajoled, threatened, sometimes whipped by the stable-lads and jockeys who flit from mesh cage to wire ladder, level to level, like multi-coloured

tightrope walkers ... or parrots.

You couldn't hear the shouts of the men, or the screams of the beasts above the roar of the giant helicopters arriving at the landing stages, or taking off with their cargoes. People came from all over the world to buy and sell horses at *Leicester's*. Tannoy announcements blared a polyglot din. I found out later that there was accommodation for half a million horses at any one time at *Leicester's*. Half a million horses. All stuck up in the sky. Anyone can do it ... given enough lift.

Desiree met me on the landing platform. "Stan's up there," she shouted over the furore. "Follow me." She indicated a series of ladders. Why don't they have elevators? I wondered. Not enough lift?

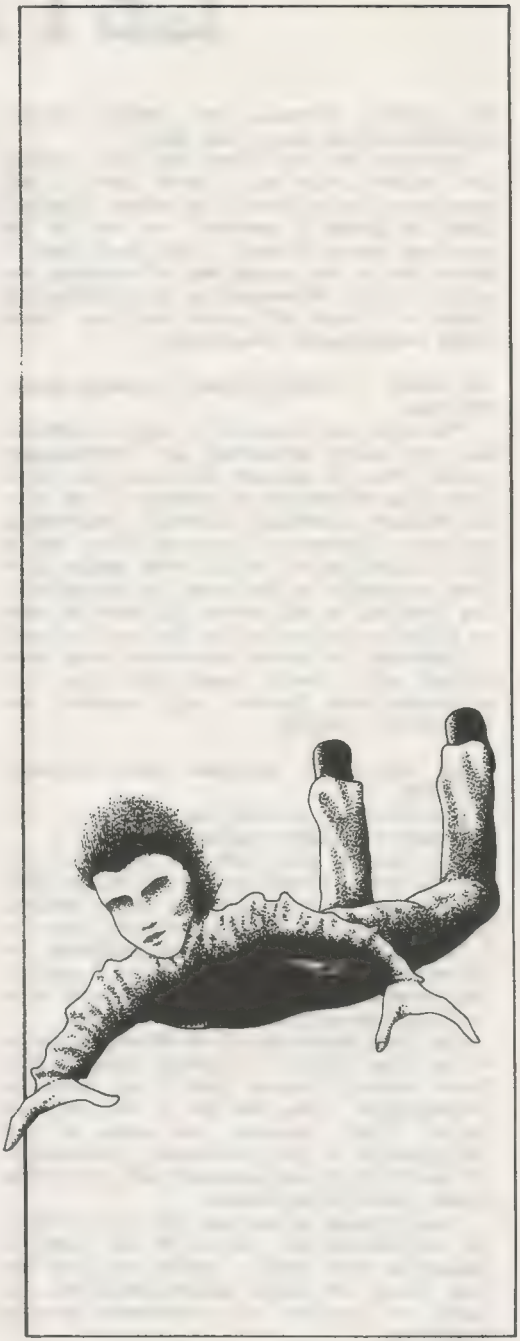
Climbing up ladders is a prehistoric pastime which cannot be adequately described to those who have not experienced it. It involved effort, grip, balance, direction and stamina in endlessly intricate and unnecessary permutations. Suffice it to say that by the time we had reached the Executive Penthouse Lounging Platform, I thought I was going to die. I sincerely hoped all this was going to be worth my while.

"You look like you could use a pick-me-up," said Stannard Brassica when he saw my breathless arrival. I could have used one at the bottom.

"When the deal's settled, I want paid in racehorses ... for tax purposes," he continued. "But first, let's talk turkey. You still haven't explained *why* you want to hijack Barlinnie Prison and take it to Samoa with all its inmates."

His glass eye glared impenetrably. I coughed, playing for time. It might have been this sudden noise, or the swaying of the deck in the high-altitude cross-winds. Whatever the reason, Brassica's artificial eyeball popped out of its socket, rolling along the floor and over the edge. Lacking the necessary lift, it fell. Eager to oblige my host, I jumped after it. That was my first mistake. I had forgotten my parachutette. That was the second. I had a feeling that this time my *Immedioplaster* fracture repair kit would be of no avail. Thank God I'm an android.

THE END



Neil Henderson comes from Glasgow. "Lift", his first story for *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE*, was one of those short-listed in the 1988 Albacon/Glasgow Herald Science Fiction/ Fantasy short story competition.

LETTERS

Tim Nickels, Terrapins Inn, Buckley Street, Salcombe, South Devon TQ8 8DD.

Thankyou for the latest *BBR*. Yes, I think the letters page is a good idea ... but something I really hate is the rather "fannish" habit of giving a personal top ten of the previous issue's stories ... but then again, I guess this is the easiest way of sounding out opinion. I was interested by Rudi Rubberoid's letter – I think it's great that you foster these transAtlantic connections.

Des Lewis, 7 Lloyd Avenue, Coulsdon, Surrey CR3 2QS.

Thankyou very much for a copy of *BBR* #11 and for kindly publishing my "Weirdmonger" series. What a splendid showcase for them! 50% of me thinks the illustration to my work is brilliant, startling, germane, frightening, positively disgusting ... but the other 50% is not so sure, maybe putting some people off!? Give my thanks to the artist for his provoking creation, in any event. (It took me ages to actually realise what the picture depicted!)

I enjoyed the whole production very much indeed and I must congratulate you. The obsessive Mark Samuels' rain vignette was particularly striking.

Peter Jeffery, 21 Meadvale Road, Leicester LE2 3WN.

Thankyou for sending me *BBR* #11 – an extremely impressive publication.

Well printed, good artwork, nicely laid out – it is truly a delight to the eye. Better still, it contains the work of two of my friends, D.F. Lewis and Mark Samuels. Mark's story is, I believe, the first he has had published, but I'm sure that it won't be the last. I suspect that publishing his first story will come to be seen as quite a coup for your magazine.

Des Lewis sends me all of his stories as he writes them (which is a goodly number) so I know whereof I speak when I say that the "Weirdmonger" tales are one of his very best series. Oddly, though, you seem to omit "Weirdmonger V" and re-number "Weirdmonger VI" as "V". It should certainly help to confuse future Lewis bibliographers!

I was pleased to see that Des now seems to be sufficiently well known for his name to appear on your cover. I cannot but feel that this issue of *BACK BRAIN RECLUSE* will serve to enhance his deservedly growing reputation.

Mark Iles, 1 Withies Road, Rowner, Gosport, Hants PO13 0EL.

Just got back from the Gulf, where I've been for the last five months, hence very little writing. I've filled in your questionnaire, and I hope what I've put is of some use. It's a bit unfair on us writers really, this sort of thing. Particularly when we get a form like this to fill in, we can't really vote for someone else's work over our own, and obviously can't vote for our own either!

To be quite honest I think that the magazine is great as it is. Not only are the stories great, usually, so it's worth buying, but it is also a medium for the struggling writer and artist, who I'm sure will remember the mag later on in life, when/if they're famous.

Nice to see stuff in it from writers well known in the field *now* too! Such as Ian Watson and Michael Moorcock (again prefer his stories to his poetry).

Dave Hughes, *Works*, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ.

"The Weirdmonger" was a strange one – and I don't just mean in content. All the way through reading it I kept thinking *there's something not quite right*. After reading it – and then starting again I realised what it was: we have a story which features strange characters and even stranger surroundings (all trade marks of Des's) and yet in and amongst all this *alien* scenario, we find a black bin liner! Surely a rather modern day curse. Then we find fags, another 'modern' name; again we find 'yonks' and to complete the anachronisms, Guy Fawkes! Whether Des is using these things and weaving another type of unreality around them isn't really clear. the picture that depicts the market stall, to me, wasn't really needed – there were far better images in the story that would have done both the story and the artist more justice.

Two things spoilt "Caught in the Rain" for me. Firstly the illo – yes I know it's a good illo, but it condenses three written pages into one visual. Okay, I concede, the illo didn't actually jump out at me and tell me the story, it's just that I put two and two together long before I should have been adding. The second spoiler was the writer's obsession with the rain. Not only did it just rain, but it was pouring, gushing, rushing, drumming, drowning and every other word in

the thesaurus can give. After a few times the obvious fact that it's pissing down becomes drilled in too much.

It would be nice to see some poetry in *BBR* – and I think it's a bloody shame that you've dropped it. I know there are places, and many of them, where poetry is printed – but not SF POETRY! Apart from *AUGURIES* and *WORKS*, there are very, very few and with your decline in that respect, there's even one less. Bring back SF Poetry to *BBR* – it was also a better and more professional way to break up the stories. I know *BBR* had poems not strictly SF, why not bring strictly SF poems back in? Especially when the likes of Andy Darlington, Steve Sneyd and J.F. Haines have their work published in magazines where the appreciation of such is, shall we say limited?

Dallas Goffin, 4A Malthouse Crescent, Heacham, King's Lynn, Norfolk PE31 7DN.

Many thanks for *BBR* #11. Despite the absence of poetry in this issue, I think it could well be the best yet. The fiction is all very stimulating, particularly "Sensonomicon" – a tale which deserves a professional reprinting in an anthology of contemporary SF. Also, the Ian Watson piece is a great scoop. I like the new production too – laminated covers always add a touch of class to the small-press scene – though I suspect the price increase may upset a few people!

Matthew Dickens, 25 Meadowmead Avenue, Regents Park, Southampton SO1 4LW.

BBR seems to be improving all the time – not just in standard of fiction, but in artwork, layout, the lot.

Now I'll skip straight to "Sensonomicon": it was staggeringly good. Now for the qualification: it's cyberpunk. Not, I hasten to add, that there's anything categorically wrong with cyberpunk – I read it myself, and usually enjoy it. *However*, I have a complaint about reading it in 'zines like *BBR*, which is this: cyberpunk is an essentially American fad – it originated in the US, has been developed and propagated by American writers, and is altogether very American in feel, despite its apparent cosmopolitanism. This being so (and doubtless many disagree), why is it being promoted in this country as state of the art SF, as the in-vogue genre that everyone wants to read? Okay, so *Neuromancer* sold millions – but this doesn't mean we should fall over ourselves to emulate it.

I'm not saying *everyone's* doing this, by any means, but it's an increasing trend – and not just cyberpunk, but US-style SF in general; let me cite a few examples: Lyle Hopwood, Eric Brown, S.M. Baxter, William King ... All of these talented and popular writers seem to imitate very closely various talented and popular American authors. Yes, they produce good SF – and perhaps you will argue that this is enough. But I'd contend that simply to ape, however skillfully, standards set by others, is self-limiting and sterile.

Hopwood and Brown both have a flawless command of the cyberpunk idiom; but this seems like learning French in order to be able to exchange banalities in a foreign language, when perhaps it would be more profitable to explore the potentialities of one's own language first, in order to produce something above the mere utilitarian. I'm not saying there's some mystical 'language' of SF peculiar to Britain, but the fact remains that some of the finest SF ever written has come from this country, and it has always had its own unique (yes, Charles, sometimes down-beat) flavour.

What I *am* saying is, it's this peculiar 'Britishness' (if it exists) which British writers should be seeking, rather than a pale, slavish imitation of American SF. And I don't think I'm advocating a wholesale attempt to emulate Ballard or Roberts or Watson – no, rather a continuation of the individualistic spirit which the exemplify – after all, they're successful and popular enough, aren't they? This country's already too Americanised ... The day I see "Have a Nice Day" on the dust-jacket of a British SF novel – that's when I'll reach for all that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky one never seems to find time for ...

Mike Ashley, 4 Thistlebank, Walderslade, Chatham, Kent ME5 8AD.

Before I get a chance to catch up with my mail after the postal strike and thank you for the copies of *BBR* up zaps another issue. I was impressed enough with the other issues – and said as much in *LOCUS* – but #11 is even more impressive. It's got that right instant appeal to it with the cover, layout and design, but moreover you deliver the goods as well. Fiction and interior art are of a very high quality and I found "The Weirdmonger" amongst the best of stories I've read recently. There's the right touch of the sinister about it. Funnily enough I thought it actually ended at the bottom of page 11 because that would have been a great final line and was rather surprised to find it continued over the page as I'm not sure the last part added much more to the story. But all good stuff.

MAGAZINES

Prose

AUGURIES, Nik Morton, 48 Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants PO12 2EQ. #10: A5, 60pp, £1:25, 4/£4:00. A special "time" theme issue of the South Hants science fiction magazine, showing *Auguries* at its best ever. Leaders of the pack are Elliot Smith's "Fish Out of Water" and "Hope Springs Eternal" by Kevin Lyons, with other stories by John Light, Colin Davies, Nick Daws, Peter Jeffery. A fine crop of fiction, only marred perhaps by the lesser quality of design and illustration, which is not on a par with other comparable small press magazines.

MAELSTROM, Malcolm Wright, 31 Chiltern, Coleman Street, Southend-on-Sea, Essex SS2 5AE. #2: A5, 36pp, £1:00. A magazine dealing with more mainstream than experimental fiction, *Maelstrom* boasts stories by Phil Carradice, Gabriel Chanan, Derrick Gaskin, Edmund Harwood, Monica Aldous, Joy Matthews and Steve Sneyd. Although for such a young magazine it is good at what it does, *Maelstrom* would nevertheless benefit from being more adventurous in design and content. Also available from Malcolm Wright is SOL magazine, #25: A5, 36pp, £1:00, a poetry magazine similar in form and content to *Maelstrom*.

NEW PATHWAYS into science fiction & fantasy, c/o MGA Services, PO Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994 USA. #12: A4, 44pp, $4, 4/$15. As ever with *New Pathways*, a highly polished production, with best use made of the large-format pages. In this issue, the cadre of reviewers expands and each gets their own section, for books, medium and small press, as well as comics and occasional zines. Highlight for me in this issue was an excerpt from *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick*, which provided an interesting and to my mind valuable glimpse of the workings of the mind of this late, great man. On the fiction front John Shirley's "Sleepwalkers" is easily one of the best stories I've read this side of Andy Darlington, whilst regular contributor Brian Aldiss offers the magical "The Day We Embarked for Cythera ...". Andy Watson describes a battle of high finance with pop supergroups floated as shares on stockmarkets, and Matt Howarth's comic strip "Ovtcome" is refreshingly crisp.

WORKS, Dave Hughes and Andy Stewart, 12 Blakestones Road, Slaithwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ. #2: A5, 52pp, £1:25, 4/£4:50. The latest offering from this fast-rising addition to the science fiction/fantasy small press scene, and already *WORKS* is finding a surety of direction and feel. Centre stage is the second and concluding episode of Andy Darlington's novella "Isis", but in close support is "The Last Trawlerman" by John Peters, a story of revenge in the post-economic collapse, and Nik Morton's short-short "One Last Glance". There are other, more mood-oriented stories by D.F. Lewis, Alan Garside, John Light and P.T. Ross, plus poetry by Terry Broome, Steve Sneyd, Ray Jon, J.P.V. Stewart and Alfa. Well worth investigating.

Visual

SIDESHOW COMICS, Pan Graphics, 10 Greystones Road, Sheffield S11 7JU. Vol.1 #2: 10"x7", 32pp, £1:25, 12/£13:50. Out of the blue comes issue #2 of this new monthly comic from right on my doorstep in Sheffield. New names to me all bar one-time *BBR* illustrator David Windett, *Sideshow* is proof enough that comics are alive and thriving in Britain like never before. Star of the show is Euan Smith, whose two-pager "Tales from the Nick" was quite simply superb. To describe it more fully would spoil the effect for any who go on to read it. Send me more!

THE RUBBER FANZINE, Rudi Rubberoid, PO Box 2432, Bellingham, WA 98227-2432 USA. Vol.4 #1: A4, 20pp, $1.60, 3/$4. Rubber stamp madness of a very adventurous and interesting nature. You'll be amazed what these people come up with using those rubber things on

handles you thought were only used on official documents ... If you haven't checked this one out already, there's a sampler of rubber stamp art coming up in *BBR* #13.

Market

FACTSHEET FIVE, Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502 USA. #28: A4, 88pp, $5. Over 500 magazine reviews, plus articles, letters, books and music. From straight prose, poetry and indie music to psychological, psychosexual, quasi-religious and neo-political, if there's an American (or non-American) small press magazine published on it then it'll be listed and reviewed here. Extremely valuable reference material.

SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER, Janet Fox, 519 Ellinwood, Osage City, KS 66523-1329. #58: A5, 28pp, 12/$16. Continuing the new large volume format, a sure sign that *Scavenger's* is going from strength to strength. This important and influential market magazine gives reviews and information from both sides of the Atlantic, and is an essential investment for any writers or readers wishing to check out the American small press market.

Books

UNCLE OVID'S EXERCISE BOOK by Don Webb, from Illinois State University/Fiction Collective. ISBN 0-932-51118-X. A5, 164pp perfect bound, $8:95 + p&p. No contact address given so suggest write to Don Webb at 9601 Middle Fiskville Rd #Q7, Austin, Texas 78753-3857, USA for availability details. *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book* was 1988 Winner of the Illinois State University/Fiction Collective Award. Its series of metamorphoses are brief and to the point, yet with those few luminous details Don Webb weaves entire worlds, only to shatter them to glittering fragments. Some of the scenarios require second reading for their full force to become apparent, but that only serves to demonstrate the depth of feel and innovation that Don pulls together in the diverse segments as he creates the whole of Uncle Ovid's unique scheme of things. Even the chaotic prime number of metamorphoses, 97 in all, not nice orderly 95 or 100, hints at some demonic masterplan concealed tantalisingly just below the surface. Described by the Contest Judge, Michael Anania as a "strange, funny, frightening wonder, a Saturday kid's show for grownups", *Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book* is sure to entertain for many weekends to come.

Classified Adverts

THE EDGE. First bimonthly issue, 28 A4 pages, now available. Fiction: Clark, Light, Lewis, Sneyd, Hughes etc. Features by Mike Ashley, John Martin. £1:30 inc. p&p. Cheques/postal orders payable to *The Edge*. Order from G. Evans, 56 Writtle Road, Chelmsford, Essex. CM1 3BU. Contributions welcome.

UPDATE SUPPLEMENT to "Guide to Privately Published Periodicals" and their freelance requirements, £1; guide and supplement, £4. Also: "Writers' Guide to Trade Journals", £2; "Publish for Profit", £1:70. All, £7. G. Carroll, 11 Shirley Street, Hove, East Sussex BN3 3WJ.

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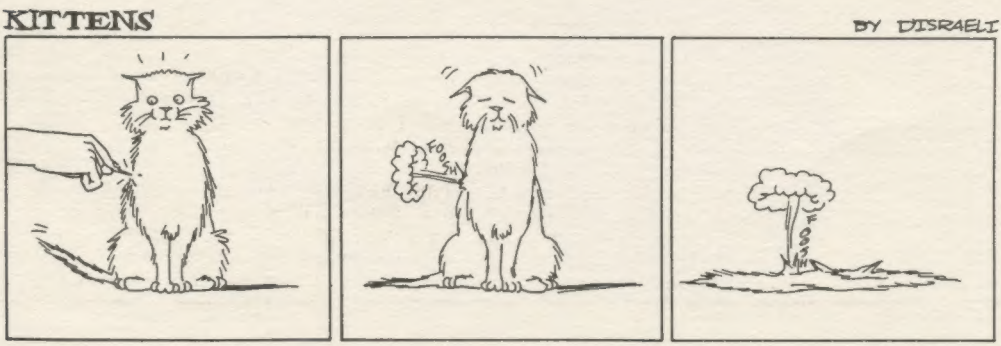

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